And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss. by canijustsaysomethingcrazy

Category: Mädchen in Uniform | Girls in Uniform (1958)
Genre: F/F, Fluff, Romance, and a healthy amount of angst
Characters: Elisabeth von Bernburg, Manuela von Meinhardis
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2018-08-16
Updated: 2019-05-05
Packaged: 2022-12-05 09:33:25
Rating: Mature
Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Chapters: 12
Words: 22,968
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Story URL: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15706185
Author URL: https://archiveofourown.org/users/canijustsaysomethingcrazy/pseuds/canijustsaysomethingcrazy
Summary:

A sequel of some sort to "Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged," which I strongly recommend you read first. Takes place 5 years later as Manuela and Elisabeth are happily settled in their new life, away from all the troubles of the past. Or are they?

Relationships: Elisabeth von Bernburg/Manuela von Meinhardis
Comments: 46
Kudos: 170

1. Chapter 1

September 1917

Manuela moved across the stage like she did in life; with instinct and the utmost sincerity. Contrary to the other comedians surrounding her, she did not act. On stage, she simply was, and it was enough. Elisabeth revelled in thinking, perhaps a bit possessively, that no one else could tell but herself. Oftentimes, she would sneak into the dimly lit auditorium, sometimes even without Manuela knowing, and sit through countless rehearsals, preferably in the back row where she knew she would not be drawing any sort of attention. Then, she would get to watch, enthralled, as her young wife would give life to characters with such passion that it was at times overwhelming. Elisabeth twitched and sighed, cried and chuckled alongside Manuela, forever swayed by how true, how raw every line rang when delivered by the younger woman, and how much of her own emotions she poured into the words. Manuela was magnetic, fascinating and Elisabeth, as much as just about anyone who saw her act, only had eyes for her.

This evening, she had left work earlier than expected and had walked straight to the small theatre, her briefcase full of students' essays tucked under her arm. From her usual spot, she noticed that the atmosphere onstage seemed to suddenly shift and frowned when Manuela threw her hands up in the air and turned to a man sitting in the front row. Elisabeth could only see the back of his balding head, but it was unmistakably the company's art director, Mr Jensen –a fellow German immigrant who had given a young, fresh off the boat Manuela her first chance as an understudy. Considering where she was at now, he certainly patted himself on the back every day for having taken a chance on her.

"I cannot do this any longer," Manuela said, pointing at her acting partner who, in turn, was eyeing her with quite a bit of apprehension. "He is not ready -I'm sorry Ivan, you're not. The

premiere is in three days. How can you even think it will be anything but a mess?"

Elisabeth felt her chest swell with pride and braced herself for what would surely come next. Manuela did not seriously consider leaving the role behind –or her fellow comedians-, but seeing her stake her claim so intensely was always a delight, albeit a guilty one.

"Manuela, please…" she heard Mr Jensen say, and was surprised to see him stand up and walk to the stage.

Elisabeth watched intently as Manuela jumped from the scene, and leant forward as she got to the man's level, listening to whatever he was whispering with limited interest.

"I *am* giving him a chance. I'm not saying I am absolutely flawless; I certainly am not. But he can't even remember two lines in a row. How am I supposed to work with this, really?" she asked, opening her arms and letting them fall exaggeratingly -comically really- at her sides to make her point.

"Listen… I'll talk to him. He is young. It's his first big role…" the man said, scratching his head in dismay in search of a proper explanation for the young comedian's lack of talent.

Elisabeth pursed her lips, unconvinced. Ivan had joined the company a few months prior, much to Manuela's utter dismay.

"I have nothing against him, but he is way too young! He's unfit for this career," Manuela had complained after meeting him for the first time.

"How young, exactly?" Elisabeth had enquired with an amused tilt of her head.

"I don't know. Maybe 19 or 20, can you imagine?"

"Appalling," the older woman had gasped exaggeratingly, which had earned her a glare from a visibly unamused Manuela.

"He's an incompetent. Did you know that his family name is Chekhov ? So

I told him 'Well, what are the odds?' –just to make small talk, you see. He just looked at me blankly, and I could tell from the look on his face that he had absolutely no idea what I was talking about!"

"Manuela… Not having heard of Chekhov does not necessarily make someone an idiot. Give him a chance, he might surprise you," Elisabeth had chastised softly.

The young comedian had huffed, but had not argued further, willing to concede that time would, indeed, tell whether or not the first impression was always right. As it turned out, it had been all too accurate.

"I know what you're going to tell me already. But I can't act opposite him in these circumstances. It would be an insult to the company and to you, Gerhardt," she said, pointing a finger at the man's chest. "Not to mention, an insult to myself."

Elisabeth felt her lips stretch into an involuntarily grin at her wife's repartee. Manuela was only 21, but it seemed that her ease and her understanding of life were going beyond her young years, making her appear like a figure of authority and wisdom next to most people twice her age.

"Go home. Relax, have a good night's sleep. I'll talk to him," the short man assured again, more urgently this time. "I can guarantee that he'll have improved by tomorrow. All right?"

"You always say that," she said, shaking her head with a tired smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Without another word, Manuela proceeded to walk up the narrow passage separating the rows. When she reached Elisabeth's level, she gave an absentminded nod and resumed walking, before it dawned on her just who she had greeted, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, rushing to take the woman's hand and sitting next to her in the still obscure room.

"I decided to stop by and wait for you after work… What an exit, by the way," she nodded at the stage where Manuela's colleague were hustling and bustling quite laughably.

Manuela chuckled, a bit uncomfortable.

"It's not always this way…"

"I found it very entertaining," the older woman assured. "Poor Ivan does not seem to have improved much, has he?"

"Oddly enough, he seems to be getting worse with each passing day. If only he stopped asking about you… I might be a bit more lenient. He sends his regards by the way," Manuela said, her tone slightly more biting than necessary.

"Well that's… nice of him, I suppose."

"Hmm," the younger woman pursed her lips and remained silent for a moment as she let her eyes wander over the other comedians onstage, and particularly Ivan, who decidedly seemed to be the cause of many troubles lately.

"He's in love with you, you know," Manuela finally let out which earned her a loud, inelegant and flat out uncharacteristic snort from Elisabeth.

"What are you on about?"

"He *is*! He is smitten, I see how his eyes light up whenever you are around!" she all but whined.

"That's a bit rich, coming from someone with countless suitors, wouldn't you say?"

It was not unheard of that many of Manuela's colleagues were quite taken with the young actress and that her admirers only grew with the representations. Elisabeth understood, of course and she usually laughed it off. Manuela had this type of undefinable charisma that moved people to the core from the first time they laid eyes on her.

And it only intensified when she took the stage. Manuela, of course, despised the idea, she who viscerally hated to be praised for her looks and usually did not know how to take a compliment.

"People should mind their own business. They should know you are mine," she sighed, turning to really look at Elisabeth for the first time tonight. Her bun was slightly less tight than it had been in the morning before she had left for work and there was colour in her cheeks, either from the warmth of the room, or from something else, entirely.

"They know it. And if they don't, we'll notify them," Elisabeth assured, her smile ever soothing, ever reassuring. "Let's hurry back home, shall we? Are you hungry?"

Manuela's lips stretched into a lazy smile and she leant slightly forward, letting her nose and lips brush against the long, slender neck in an almost kiss.

"Starving," she murmured and savoured the feeling of the vibrating shiver coursing through Elisabeth's body.

"Well then… let's go."

2. Chapter 2

"Honey, I'm home!"

The unexpected sound of the front door slamming open made Manuela jump out of her but it only took her a split second to identify the intruder's identity, and she groaned, half relieved and half frustrated. From the corner of her eye, she considered Elisabeth who had not lifted her head from the newspaper she was reading, unbothered that her sister had just shamelessly let herself into their house. A few months back, all three of them had come to the agreement that living huddled together in the two-bedroom flat was probably not ideal for everyone's sanity –and sense of privacy- and Ida, who was now earning more than Manuela and Elisabeth combined due to her flourishing career had had no difficulty finding a place of her own. Yet, she still harboured a particular distaste for being alone, which she usually was save from the countless extravagant parties she attended or the occasional visits of a lover. For this reason, she often took the liberty of visiting the couple whenever she pleased, regardless of her former complaints about the "unbearable promiscuity" that reigned there.

"We really need to take back her key," Manuela murmured through greeted teeth.

"What are you both doing still in your nightgowns?" Ida gasped as she entered the kitchen, immaculately coiffed and dressed. She examined with a critical eye the two women who were still not done with breakfast at such an ungodly hour.

"It's 9 o'clock. On a Sunday," Manuela enunciated pointedly, but still she got up to kiss her sister-in-law on the cheek. "Tea?"

Ida pursed her lips in consideration, not unlike her older sister sometimes did although Manuela thought better of pointing that out.

"Alright then," she sighed after a while, as if surrendering to a most unpleasant fate.

"What brings her majesty by this morning?" Elisabeth asked, eventually looking up from her newspaper with a teasing smile.

"To regale you both with tales of last night's party, of course."

"There was a party?" Manuela asked, stifling a yawn as she set a steaming cup of tea in front of her.

The other woman eyed her as if she had completely lost her mind, and turned to her sister for support, soon to realise she was just as clueless.

"You two are the most infuriatingly boring people I have ever met," she hissed.

"If running from boarding school to America with my impossibly beautiful teacher is boring to you, then I don't mind," the younger woman retorted smugly.

"You truly are *anything* but boring, darling," Elisabeth assured, reaching for her hand to give it a loving kiss.

"And you truly are impossibly beautiful. Among other things," Manuela whispered, her pale blue orbs suddenly shining with adoration.

"Oh don't mind me," Ida huffed from the other side of the table, making the two women break away from each other reluctantly.

"Right. The much-vaunted party. How was it?"

"Thank you for asking," she exhaled in apparent relief. "It was delightful! I ran into Romberg yet again –for the second time this

month, mind you. I don't believe in coincidences. He is considering composing something for me, I can tell. A whole operetta, I'm guessing… This is all to be kept under wraps for now, of course, but I have a feeling that something amazing is in the works. He called me the most promising cantatrice of the decade, can you imagine?"

"Hmm? Oh that's –that's quite something, isn't it?" Manuela said, trying to remember who this Romberg bloke Ida was gushing over was.

"And that's not all!"

"Isn't it?"

"I had the most captivating conversation with the British deputy ambassador. What a fine, cultured man, this one. He has travelled the world, well-versed in the arts…"

"He sounds like a good catch."

"Yes, well –there is the technicality of him being married."

"You really do have a thing for married men," Manuela guffawed, and quickly hid it behind a cough at Elisabeth's indignant glare.

"Must we go through this again? I was unaware that Marcel had a wife during our… fling."

"Until she followed Elisabeth home, threatening to strangle her because she had mistaken her for you…" Manuela reminded her. "I had to lock her in the bathroom until we could talk some sense into her."

"Those were the days," Ida sighed, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

"No more of these adulterous activities, I couldn't handle it," Elisabeth warned firmly.

"Not to worry. I met the wife before any misunderstanding could settle in, this time. A charming creature, albeit a bit troubling. She

seemed oddly familiar," she said, pensive. "Pretended to be Russian, curiously enough."

"Maybe because she *was* Russian?" Manuela provided.

"Oh, no, no, honey. I would recognize a Prussian with my eyes closed from across a crowded room, believe me. But it's not exactly something the wife of a British official would want to publicize these days, isn't it? It's only fair."

Elisabeth and Manuela remained silent for a moment, both pondering on what Ida had just said with various degrees of gravity. Manuela was the first to break the silence, rounding her eyes dramatically.

"A singer *and* a detective all rolled into one? Ida, you really are something else. Now, be serious," she added with finality. "There is no reason for anyone to keep quiet about their so-called Prussian origins. We should know, we're the first ones concerned."

"Do you, really?" Elisabeth retorted after a while. "Maybe you are not faced with such situations in your daily life –maybe most of your audience has no idea where you are even from. But people feel very strongly about Germans lately, you should not be taking it so lightly."

This gave the younger woman pause, and she looked between her wife and sister-in-law, perplexed at the sudden change in atmosphere. And then appalled.

"Darling! Surely you don't believe that anyone would ever target us because of this!"

"Of course, they would. People are being sacked, forced aside. German schools are closing. Look around you. I could lose my job…"

"What are you talking about? Have you been threatened?" Manuela stammered, jumping from her chair to kneel in front of Elisabeth, concern now apparent on her face.

"Not directly, no. But Manuela, things are shifting and… not for the best."

The young actress took her beloved wife's hands in hers as wide, pale blue orbs fell into a stormy sea of dark blue.

"Why didn't you say anything? Are you scared?" she asked, almost unwillingly. Knowing that Elisabeth could have been this preoccupied without telling her was unbearable, and it made her stomach churn with dread. How blind was she if she was not even able to discern her wife's discomfort? The older woman seemed to understand her struggle and squeezed her hands back, gracing her with a –hopefully-convincing smile.

"It's alright. Let's just keep our eyes open and things should be fine."

There was a pregnant silence in the room that was quickly interrupted.

"Anyway –if you're done with the drama... I offered them box seat tickets for my recital next month, maybe you'll get to meet them," Ida said from her chair, visibly anxious for the attention to switch back to her.

Manuela turned to the singer sharply, and then narrowed her eyes in outrage. "You never get us box seat tickets! I had to pay a fortune for front seats last time."

"Ah honey, it's a principle. Never gift anyone tickets unless they can afford it. You'll understand when you're a renowned comedian. Hopefully you'll have reached puberty by then."

Manuela remained stunned at the affront for all but a second as she tried to think of a proper retort, before she snatched the cup of tea from her sister-in-law's hands and brought it to her lips, swiftly draining the rest of its content in one gulp. She slammed it back down on the table with thud before a puzzled Ida and an unimpressed Elisabeth, extremely pleased with herself.

"I have to deal with rowdy teenagers all day long, but you two… you two are something else entirely," the teacher sighed hopelessly. "I'm going to work for a bit. Please try not to gouge one another's eyes out

while I'm gone."

She rose from her seat and exited the room without another word, purposely ignoring the two snickering women at the table.

3. Chapter 3

"Darling! Please… help!"

Within seconds, the bedroom door shot open and a panicked Elisabeth barged in, eyes wide and frantic and brush of mascara still in hand.

"What is it?" she panted, already scanning Manuela for potential injuries.

"Oh -nothing bad," the other woman assured with an embarrassed chuckle. "Only… can you help me with this?"

She lifted her hand and Elisabeth's eyes fell on the crumpled piece of fabric that, once, must have looked like a bowtie. She took a step back, considering Manuela's attire. She was wearing an impeccable white dress shirt and tight fitted black trousers. She glanced at the chair in front of the vanity and noted the presence of the dark jacket that was supposed to complete the outfit.

"You're not wearing this," Elisabeth said flatly.

"Of course I am."

"Don't you think this is a bit…" *-too much? Unladylike? Inappropriate?*

No remark came out however, and the older woman sighed in defeat, aware that arguing with Manuela on such matters was useless, but still concerned at her blatant disregard for conventions. It seemed that Manuela delighted –and increasingly so- in bending the rules, and although admittedly endearing, this little quirk also kept challenging Elisabeth's traditional constitution. Dressing in men's clothes regularly was only one of Manuela's ways of thumbing her nose at what was considered by most proper lady etiquette. Earlier this spring, the younger woman had gone as far as to come home with her hair cropped just above the chin, which assuredly, had left

Elisabeth scandalized.

"What have you done?" she had shrieked, seizing Manuela by the shoulders even as she was still standing in the doorway in her boots and coat.

"Oh come on! Everyone does it these days. It feels so –so liberating!"

"What have you done to your hair?" Elisabeth had repeated, aghast, as her eyes had started welling up uncontrollably.

Instead of being offended or embarrassed, Manuela had calmly taken Elisabeth's hands in hers, and placed it around her own neck.

"Touch it. See how it feels."

The older woman had let out a desperate sigh but let tentative fingers start their timid journey up, almost of their own volition, brushing against soft skin and, finally, daring to plunge into shorter, but still silky strands of chestnut hair. It had felt pleasantly different, almost forbidden as if touching someone else and yet safe, reassuringly familiar.

"So?" Manuela had asked, eyes closing at the feeling of gentle fingers buried in her hair. "Do you hate it?"

Hearing no answer, she had reopened her eyes after a moment and had been surprised, albeit exceptionally satisfied, to see the adoration –and maybe a bit of lust, in Elisabeth's gaze.

"No…" she had finally confessed. "I don't hate it at all."

Manuela, used by now to her wife's way with euphemisms, had thrown her head back in laughter.

"Then, maybe you would consider cutting yours short, too?"

Manuela still remembered the look of disapproval she had received at the suggestion, a look convincing enough that the younger woman

had not dared bring up the issue ever again. She watched as Elisabeth finally took hold of the bow with a playful roll of her eyes.

"Don't move," she ordered as she went to work and started tying it around Manuela's neck expertedly. "If you're planning on dressing up as a gentleman routinely now, don't you think it is time you learn how to do this yourself?"

"What's the fun in doing it myself, when I get to do this?" Manuela said and she placed her arms over Elisabeth's shoulders, bringing her close to kiss her lips softly. Without her heels on, her wife was only slightly smaller, something Manuela always took impossible pride in.

"Be careful, Manuela," Elisabeth warned, her voice low.

"Afraid I will smudge your lipstick?"

"No, I'm afraid if you keep this up, I might have to take this bowtie off altogether. As well as the rest of the suit."

This made Manuela's smug smile drop, her eyes suddenly clouding with desire and she rushed forward for a resolutely more passionate kiss, the eventuality of any lipstick smudges totally forgotten.

"You know… I don't necessarily *have* to go…" she breathed when they parted, letting her forehead rest against Elisabeth's.

"None of this," Elisabeth cut with finality, but she could barely conceal the longing in her voice at the perspective of staying in tonight.

With Manuela's hectic schedule, their time together was scarce and was only growing scarcer these days. Neither of them turned down the possibility of skipping an event in favour of staying home together whenever they could, but tonight was an exception –it was the traditional gathering after a play's final representation. Even if Manuela wanted to –which she admittedly did not- she could not miss the little celebration that meant so much to her and her fellow

actors. It was simply a tiny reunion amongst friends, but it was always joyful and did a lot to lift the troupe's spirits.

"I miss you," Manuela still whimpered, visibly not ready to release her hold on Elisabeth's shoulders.

"As do I. Which is why I'm coming along tonight, although you know how much I dislike social affairs…"

"Oh, you love it," Manuela laughed, bringing the other woman closer for one final kiss. "You get to chaperone me and keep count of how many drinks I have."

"Well, someone *has* to," Elisabeth hissed, stepping out of the embrace a bit regretfully. "Since my sister is as reckless and incapable of restraint as you are…"

A fleeting memory of the last time she and Ida had come home after such party, quite inebriated indeed, came back to Manuela and she bit back a laugh. They had tried their best to make as little noise as possible upon letting themselves in, which had been quite the achievement considering Manuela had dragged along a gigantic and decrepit potted plant from the entrance hall, claiming she refused to watch it die slowly without doing anything. At last, both had collapsed exhausted in the nearest couch or armchair and fallen asleep in the same breath. The most interesting part had been a few hours later, when they had been woken up quite vehemently by their very displeased downstairs neighbour, Mrs Hugget, and come to the cloudy, but shameful realisation that they had entered the wrong flat the night before.

"We might be a little prone to… excessiveness, your sister and I," she admitted, but the glimmer in her eyes was proof that she felt no shame whatsoever.

Elisabeth only tutted and turned on her heels without further ado, disappearing once again in the bathroom. She came out a moment

later, makeup fully done this time and wearing an elegant, albeit simple deep burgundy gown.

"You are gorgeous," Manuela said right away, gleaming eyes roaming appreciatively over her wife's figure.

Elisabeth smiled, this almost shy but knowing smile Manuela loved so much and nodded towards her.

"Would you like a touch of lipstick?"

"Please," she replied without hesitation.

Elisabeth exited the room again and came back, lipstick in hand.

"Allow me?" she offered in a whisper, and Manuela could only nod as she stood completely still, heart suddenly hammering as Elisabeth took a gentle hold of her jaw with one hand, and made her purse her lips slightly with the other.

"Just a touch, right?" Elisabeth asked again, leaning slightly backwards to examine her work.

Unable to nod or speak any longer, the younger woman closed her eyes in silent agreement and remained religiously immobile until her wife was done, letting herself enjoy the intimacy of the moment.

"Thank you," she murmured when Elisabeth stepped back with a grin.

Finally, she reached for her jacket and put it on, looking at her reflection in the mirror and adjusting the garment with great care.

"What do you think?" she asked, turning to the older woman with extended arms.

Elisabeth took a moment to study Manuela, to fully appraise her. Her

strong Manuela, independent and fierce, who was wearing tuxedos and her hair short, who was smoking and drinking too much, and laughing too loud at her male fellow comedian's crass jokes when she thought Elisabeth couldn't hear. Her fragile Manuela, delicate and raw, who still cried whenever she looked at her mother's photograph for too long, who curled up a bit more tightly against her side during summer storms, who bought her flowers every Sunday without fail, and closed her eyes when Elisabeth did her makeup. Regardless of the circumstances, and unlike herself, Manuela never cheated, never pretended. She remained true to herself, paying no heed to the rules of so-called propriety. Oftentimes, Elisabeth found herself envying this liberty, wishing she could be as carefree and immune to other people's opinion of her. Manuela was undeniably complex and flawed, but most importantly she was beautiful and honest and in her own way…

"Perfect," Elisabeth finally let out, pleased at Manuela's sharp intake of breath and pinkening cheeks.

"Shall we, then?" she said, offering her arm. Elisabeth took it without hesitation, letting Manuela lead the way with strange anticipation.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> *timidly steps into the room* Hi guys!
>
> For those of you who were wondering, no, I'm not dead. That's at least a good way to start the new year. So, I know it's been 84 years since I last updated, but let's say that life happened these past months–and not in a particularly good way- and my motivation as well as my inspiration cleared off. It took me a while to get back on the writing wagon, as you probably have already noticed, and what you're about to read is my umpteenth attempt at writing a chapter that didn't seem completely half-assed and had at least a tiny bit of interest to it while allowing the story to advance a bit further. I'm not saying I'm fully back to regular updates like in the good old days, but I'm seriously working on it. Anyway, this chapter is extra long as far as my usual volume is concerned, and it has fluff, tipsy Elisabeth and badass Manuela in it, which, I hope, will make up a bit for my long absence.
>
> Trigger warning for racism, proper assholery and a bit of violence –as well as some poor dancing skills.

The air in the small but overcrowded club was warm and heavy with smoke, an atmosphere Elisabeth usually despised or that would have, at the very least, induced a deep frown and a reproving sigh from her under any other circumstances. Maybe she was in particularly good disposition, or maybe seeing Manuela laugh so effortlessly blunted her usual sternness, but tonight, nestled in a small booth between her lovely wife and her ever-present sister and in the company of such friendly people, Elisabeth felt at ease, unusually so. It was almost like she belonged here, with these people she had come to know and appreciate, in this country she had struggled for so long to accept as her own. Ida, who had wormed her way in like she always did whenever a social event was involved, was considering a very

oblivious Ivan with unfeigned interest while he only had eyes for Elisabeth. Strangely enough, it did not seem to bother Manuela in the least, probably as she was in the middle of a heated debate with Pierre and Marius. The three of them were exchanging passionate opinions about whom of Shakespeare or Molière had been the greatest visionary of his time, and Manuela often turned to Elisabeth to solicit her point of view on the matter. The literature teacher in her took great pleasure in the discussion, and in giving her own measured piece of opinion every now and then that they all seemed to quietly process before they went back to arguing even louder. Tucked between the two men was Jeanette, their little sister, who looked beyond drained, both from the conversation and from having her siblings shield her from the rest of the world even in a place like this. Jeanette had auditioned for a role just a little over a year ago, and had instantly been welcomed into the troupe due to her natural aura and her intuitive, albeit still hesitant acting. The only setback had been when her two brothers had walked into the theatre the next day. Jeanette was such a young, inexperienced and frail girl, had they said, and if she was to join the company, it was their duty to follow suit. In other words, if Mr Jensen wanted her in, he had no choice but to accept the entire lot.

Their protectiveness was endearing but suffocating at times, and Manuela often took pity on the poor girl although she was far from being as naïve as her brothers deemed her to be. Needless to say they would have been shocked to hear of Jeanette's relationship with Will, the latest and much controversial addition to the company. The man was currently busy staring at the bottom of his glass in a desperate attempt to avoid eye contact with his beloved Jeanette. The troupe had been vehemently criticised for hiring an African-American man as a regular, but his talent had soon conquered everybody who was anybody in New York, and people were now rushing to get a glimpse of these young and audacious actors who were, slowly but surely, proceeding to renew the fusty theatre landscape. At the end of the table, Mr Jensen and his wife were eyeing the unlikely group with a mixture of tenderness and pride, like one would appraise their turbulent, but otherwise endearing children. Elisabeth felt oddly at ease amongst these people who had welcomed her in without asking questions, just because they knew Manuela cared about her and tonight of all nights, she felt unexplainably cheerful. The fact that she

was nursing her third glass of sherry was probably not uninvolved with her current state of contentment, but she did not look as embarrassed about it as she normally would have.

"Are you alright?" Manuela asked, leaning against her and nodding at the almost empty glass with a certain twinkle in her eye.

"Of course, I am," Elisabeth huffed, downing the rest of her drink and eyeing the younger woman almost defiantly.

"Right. Still, don't feel like you have to keep up with these sad drunkards," Manuela insisted with a chuckle.

"Are you implying that I cannot hold my liquor?"

"Oh, I would *never*," the younger woman said, pretending to be outraged at the very thought. "I like you tipsy, however," she continued, her voice dropping as she leaned against her shoulder. "You are free to have a bit of fun. I am here to look after you."

Elisabeth's eyes narrowed at the suggestion, and she pressed her hand against Manuela's chest, effectively pushing her away.

"This is beyond ridiculous. *I* am here to look after *you*. And," she added, lifting a very serious index finger between them, "I can assure you that I am absolutely, categorically not tipsy."

For half a second, Manuela remained stoic before she erupted into laughter and wrapped her hand around Elisabeth's wrist, bringing her still raised finger to her mouth to give it a loving kiss, and blissfully unconcerned with the fact that they were in public. Oddly enough, Elisabeth did not seem to care either, and she smiled at the gesture, letting her finger brush a second longer against Manuela's lips before she withdrew it. Her cheeks, already flushed from the alcohol and the heat in the room, turned a deeper shade of pink. The younger woman studied her for a moment and sighed contentedly before she turned to the animated table and lifted her empty glass in the air.

"Alright, kids! I've got this round."

They were already well into the night and one of the only table of remaining clients when Mr Jensen got up without a word and went to sit behind the piano, much to everyone's surprise. As the first notes of Strauss' Blue Danube resonated in the room, everyone cheered and applauded and his wife shook her head in embarrassment. Ivan, who had been able to focus on little else than Elisabeth all evening took it as his chance to offer her a dance, but Ida, prompt as ever even after a few too many drinks leapt to her feet and offered the man her arm. He blinked confusedly at her.

"Shall we, young man?"

Sensing that there would be no way to negotiate his way of this, he smiled politely and accepted her arm, walking her to the middle of the room as if it had been his idea all along.

"Don't they look perfectly cosy," Elisabeth chuckled as she leant against Manuela's shoulder.

"Should we join them? They look a tad ridiculous out there, just the two of them," Manuela suggested.

"I don't know about this…"

"Oh, come on darling, please. Look," she said, before turning to the people who were still sitting at the table and looking towards the improvised ballroom with amused smiles. "Pierre, *chéri*, Mrs Jensen looks like she would very much like to dance," she announced, tilting her head purposefully as if he had been a proper boor not to notice.

The woman's round cheeks turned red but, as she was starting to protest abundantly, the man got to his feet and offered his hand with

a good-natured smile that she simply could not resist.

"You are something else," Jeanette said, shaking her head in disbelief as she watched them walk arm in arm.

"Speaking of, Will looks he could do with a dance partner as well."

The not-so-secret couple exchanged a puzzled look and, before Marius could even object, they both sprung to their feet and walked towards the other amateur dancers with barely contained excitement. Marius watched the scene unfold with his mouth agape and he sharply turned to Manuela with a murderous glare.

"They grow up so fast," she sighed, batting her eyelashes at the scandalised man in front of her. "Now," she said with finality before she stood up, and extended her hand for Elisabeth to take. "May I have this dance?"

Elisabeth seemed to hesitate for a moment before she finally gave in, and she let herself be guided to the centre of the room by a delighted Manuela.

"You and your persistent ways," she sighed as they stood in front of each other.

"Look where my persistent ways got us," Manuela laughed and lifted her left hand in the air for Elisabeth to take, sliding her right hand up so it rested against her back, just below her shoulder blade.

"I should confess that I am not a very good dancer."

The admission was uttered in an almost whisper that Manuela likely would have missed if they hadn't been standing so close.

"I doubt anyone here tonight is a very good dancer," she indicated pointedly as they started twirling together and Mr Jensen hit the first notes of yet another waltz.

They danced in a sort of daze for a while, lost in each other's eyes and neither of them truly able to believe that they could share such an intimate moment in public without anyone batting an eye. The spell was quickly broken as Ida's tell-tale voice rose in the room, putting words on the piece of music as Mr Jensen's finger were furiously pounding away at the piano keys.

"She truly can't help herself, can she?" Elisabeth commented, rolling her eyes affectionately.

"And miss an opportunity to be the centre of attention? Now, this doesn't sound much like our Ida."

They exchanged a surprised look when they heard Mrs Jensen's voice resonate as well, quickly followed by her husband's, to everyone's amusement and it wasn't long before Jeanette, who was now fully enjoying herself, started singing as well in broken German.

"I suppose *Frühlingsstimmen* really is a classic anywhere in the world," Elisabeth provided.

"It appears so," Manuela agreed, studying her beloved's soft features. "You were right, by the way."

This caught Elisabeth off-guard and she turned to Manuela with a questioning look.

"What about?"

Manuela bit her lip to stop herself from grinning too much.

"You truly aren't a very good dancer," she finally let out, bracing herself as she watched the other woman's eyes widen at the offence.

"Oh, you pig!" Elisabeth exclaimed, swatting her arm. She remained grave for all but a second before she erupted in laughter. "I did warn you, didn't I?"

Manuela looked at the woman laughing in her arms and just like this, her heart seemed to burst with adoration. She tightened her grip around her, dragging her closer by the waist.

"I love you so much," she whispered hotly. "Even when you keep stepping on my toes over and over again."

Elisabeth was about to retort something equally witty and romantic in its own way when she heard her name being called from across the room. Ida had stopped waltzing with Ivan and was now standing next to the piano with Mrs Jensen and Jeanette, and the three women were motioning for her to join in. She turned back to Manuela in hesitation. The idea of speaking, and even signing in German in front of other people felt foreign, almost as illicit as openly dancing with Manuela, but Elisabeth could not help the primal pull she felt bubbling within her. She decided to throw caution to the wind, if only for tonight, and finally joined the merry choir in a few strides. Manuela followed suit without a second of hesitation, happy to share this unlikely moment with her friends and family.

The fun, however, was short-lived.

"How dare you come here and play your fucking Fritz music?" yelled a man who seemed to be coming out of nowhere, slamming an angry hand on the piano cover. His face was red and his eyes shining with something almost hysterical. The men in the group all stepped closer on instinct, ready to intervene. "Have you no respect for our soldiers fighting in a war that *you* are responsible for?"

"Come on, pal, we don't want trouble. We're here for a good time," Will said calmly, putting his hands up to try and contain the angry man.

"You don't get to tell us what to do or say, Negro," said another one who got up from his chair and stomped up to him, their noses almost

touching.

"Enough!" Manuela exclaimed, and instinctively took a step forward. "Go back to your table and leave us be!"

The two men, who so far hadn't noticed her, appraised the young woman from head to toe, considering her attire with a look that was both mocking and lecherous. This made Manuela's skin crawl, but she firmly stood her ground.

"Oh holy cow, will you look at that now! A bunch of Boches, a Negro and a dyke," the first one sneered. "What sort of freak show is that? All that's missing is a trained seal!"

"Wouldn't look half as pathetic as you two stupid bastards who have nothing better to do than bother honest people when they're having a good time," Manuela stroke back without missing a beat.

"Manuela, stop it!" Elisabeth pleaded through greeted teeth.

"Yeah, listen to mommy, kid. Isn't it past your bedtime anyway?"

"Actually…" said the one who had stepped in first as he leered at Elisabeth with a filthy grin. "I wouldn't mind taking mommy to bed myself."

He turned to his friend and they shared a raucous laughter, but the fun was interrupted when Manuela's fist violently came colliding with the side of his jaw. He fell down on his back from the impact and his eyes rounded in shock, then sheer ire.

"You little bitch," he hissed as he scrambled to his feet. "You're lucky I don't hit women…"

"How gentlemanly of you! Disrespecting women is fine, but you draw the line at hitting them?" she exclaimed, suddenly feeling inexplicably exhilarated.

This time, Elisabeth did not stay back and physically dragged her away from the commotion.

"Will you stop that, you utter idiot?" she spat as the two men were thrown out of the club without further ado.

"I'm sorry…" Manuela mumbled, sitting down on the closest chair and gulping down a random glass of gin.

"Then stop smiling if you want me to believe you," Elisabeth huffed.

"Sorry," the young woman said again before she let out a heartfelt laugh. "Actually, no. I'm not sorry. It felt good!"

"Manuela, are you okay?" was Ida's first question as she rushed to sit next to her. "This was amazing!"

"This was ridiculous, and reckless!" Elisabeth pointed out, outraged by her sister's lack of judgment –but then, what else was new?

"I think I might have broken something. But it was worth it," Manuela admitted, looking down proudly at her bloody knuckles.

Elisabeth wanted to turn away and remain uninterested to make a point. If Manuela's hand hurt, it was just as well. One did not get involved into an obscene bar brawl without having to face the consequences. She stayed stoic all but two seconds before she kneeled in front of her wife and took her injured hand in hers with a concerned frown.

"Does it hurt? Oh darling, it looks terrible!"

"Nothing hurts but my heart when you look at me like that," Manuela whispered in a way that made Elisabeth's breath catch in her throat.

"I am not sorry for what I did, but I apologize for scaring you," she added, sincerely, this time.

The older woman remained silent for a while, before she broke into an adoring smile.

"I love you. Even when you fight like a vulgar gangster."

Yes, Manuela thought as she smiled to herself. It had been worth it, without a single doubt.

5. Chapter 5

Manuela stormed out of the theatre and made sure to slam the stage door shut on her way out. She was fuming. A so-called outbreak of stomach flu had descended upon the troupe, and half of her fellow actors had been excused for the day. After a few hours spent attempting to circumvent this unexpected downsizing, the director had had no other choice but to cancel today's rehearsal altogether, enjoining the few remaining members of the company to go home and above all else, come back healthy and rested the next day. Stepping into the street, Manuela looked down at her watch. Almost 5 o'clock. This meant that, if she was quick enough, she could meet Elisabeth before she left work and she hurried to the nearest subway entrance with newfound enthusiasm.

It was a bit odd, Manuela realised as she finally reached the austere building, that it was the first time she would actually step into the school where Elisabeth had been teaching for well over four years. At Manuela's repeated suggestions that she would like to see what her life at work looked like, especially considering Elisabeth never missed a chance to come see her at the theatre, the other woman usually answered that there was absolutely nothing of interest there and that it was best if she stayed clear of the school without elaborating further. Up until now, Manuela had accepted the unexpressed ban, reckoning that her presence would certainly displease quite certain people in the very conservative institution. Standing in front of the gigantic oak doors, she looked at herself and smoothed down invisible wrinkles on her trousers. Ah, yes. Maybe this would cause a few noses to turn up. Shrugging, Manuela decided she would simply have to be discreet and she stepped into the hall. Thankfully, it was empty save for a woman with grey hair sitting behind a desk in the corner who was engrossed in the newspaper splayed out in front of her and blissfully unaware of Manuela's presence. The young woman cleared her throat to catch her attention, and the secretary lifted her head slowly, the look on her face one of sheer boredom. She sighed, already exhausted at the prospect of having to engage in a conversation.

"I'm looking for Fr- for Miss von Bernburg?"

"First floor, right corridor, third door to the left," the woman enunciated before she lowered her head again, going back to reading her newspaper and to ignoring Manuela.

"Oh… Thank you, then," Manuela exhaled, relieved. "That was easy," she mumbled to herself as she rushed upstairs, two steps at a time.

It did not take long for her to spot the door to Elisabeth's class, and she paused to study the small tag where "Fräulein von Bernburg" was written in elegant calligraphy. When she knocked, she was surprised and admittedly a little embarrassed to realise how wildly her heart was hammering in her chest. She bit her lip upon hearing the faint "Come in," from behind the door and she gently pushed it open. Elisabeth was sitting at her desk, scribbling down some notes that she did not look up from even as she heard the door open. It was baffling how little the woman seemed to age. She looked now virtually the same as when Manuela had first spotted her in this staircase, back in Potsdam. Nothing had changed, from the straight shoulders, tight bun and full lips pursed together, and Manuela felt a rush of adoration combined with certain apprehension, not unlike she did whenever she stepped into Elisabeth's classroom as a student.

"Yes?" Elisabeth said absent-mindedly, still not looking up.

"May I come in, Fräulein von Bernburg?" Manuela uttered, her tone deliberately sheepish although she did feel like a schoolgirl all over again.

It seemed to do the trick, as Elisabeth's hand stopped mid-scrawl and her head shot up in surprise. Manuela noticed the frown and the extra tension in her shoulders right away.

"What are you doing here?" Elisabeth asked without humour. Her voice, too, sounded strained.

"Everyone is sick or about to be, out there. It became clear that no

work would get done when we had to watch Marius vomit in his own hat mid-monologue."

"Charming," Elisabeth said, scrunching up her nose in disgust. "Are you sick, too, then?"

Manuela shrugged, and walked to the desk in a few long strides, her earlier hesitation quickly forgotten.

"I feel fine. I was furious at first, as you can imagine. The full dress rehearsal is only two weeks from now, and nothing is ready. But then, when is it ever?" she said with a smile as she brazenly sat on Elisabeth's desk. "Now… How long as it been since we've been alone in a classroom, again?"

Elisabeth opened her mouth to retort but the feeling of Manuela's lips pressed against the column of her neck rendered her momentarily speechless.

"I'm… afraid I will have to stop you right there," she finally found the strength to articulate as said lips started to make their way slightly lower.

"Really, now?" came Manuela's distracted reply in-between kisses. She did not seem to believe her in the least.

Elisabeth closed her eyes and exhaled as she leant back in her chair and away from Manuela's lips. It was almost physically painful to break away, especially when she craved Manuela's comforting touch so much, but something of greater importance was occupying her mind.

"When I came in this morning, this was waiting for me on the desk," she said, pushing a white envelope towards Manuela before she could protest.

Quite predictably, the younger woman was pouting, but she seized the letter without missing a beat. Elisabeth watched the various emotions play on her face, probably like they had on hers as she had read the note earlier. Curiosity. Incomprehension. And then,

complete indignation.

"They're sacking you?" Manuela gawked, slamming the note furiously down on the table.

"I'm afraid so."

"But why? Why would they do this to you?"

"You read it yourself. They no longer require my services."

"This is ridiculous! Surely there must be something you can do about it?"

Elisabeth shook her head, her red lips pinching into a thin line.

"I was in the middle of writing to the director when you came in, but I know all too well that it will be for nothing. This is already over and done with."

Manuela seemed to think for a moment, before she threw her hands in the air in a dismissive gesture.

"Well, it's their loss. You will find another position elsewhere in no time, and they will be left sobbing when they realise their mistake."

"No, I won't. No one wants their children to learn anything about German literature these days. I knew that it could happen, but I simply feel…" Elisabeth abruptly stood up and walked to the window, turning her back to Manuela, who was behind her in a flash. On instinct, she wrapped her arms around her waist, her chin resting against her shoulder.

"Darling… This is only a means of livelihood. You will be fine…" she coaxed, trying to sound comforting. When Elisabeth turned in her arms and pushed her away with a frown however, Manuela realised she had sounded anything but.

"How *dare* you say that? What if you were in my situation, have you even thought of it? Would you be fine if you knew that you could possibly never act again, because of something as fundamental and unalterable as your own identity?"

Manuela had not expected the outburst and took several steps back, the sharp words hitting her like successive blows in the stomach.

"Elisabeth –I did not mean anything by…"

"I need to be alone," the other woman snapped, turning her back on Manuela with finality.

"Y-you're telling me to leave?"

"I am asking you to respect my wish to be alone for a while. I need to clear my desk and I have quite a lot of things to sort out before I leave. I will meet you at home."

Manuela considered protesting again, but the coldness in Elisabeth's tone left her stunned, and inarticulate. She walked to the door without another word, risking a final glance towards the frail and immobile silhouette standing by the window before she exited the room. Just a few moments ago, she had walked up these stairs for the first time in a frenzy of excitement, and she was now hurtling down the very same stairs for what was probably the last time, eyes burning with unshed tears and heart heavy with guilt.

Manuela jumped from the armchair she was slouched on the moment she heard the key turn in the lock. She quickly looked for the book she had let fall to the ground a long time ago, unable to register the meaningless words as she anxiously waited for Elisabeth to return. She never had been in the position of having to wait for her to come home before; it was always the other way around, Elisabeth patiently sitting in this very armchair, working or reading until Manuela came home, usually at ungodly hours. Manuela briefly wondered how her

wife always managed to greet her with a loving smile, regardless of what time and state she came back. She felt emotionally drained and it had only been –she glanced at the clock– three hours. She waited for Elisabeth to reach the doorway and drew in a sharp breath when she did. Her eyes were red and empty, and her cheeks had lost their natural pink hue. She took a few hesitant steps and Manuela noticed the briefcase she was holding. It looked heavy, almost bursting at the seams and the young woman realised that once again, Elisabeth had had to figuratively squeeze her whole life into a bag and walk away from what remained of it without notice. The insensitiveness of her previous reaction to the news of her dismissal came back to her even more forcefully and she felt her chest constrict in shame.

"I made dinner," she attempted, afraid of saying something that would make the other woman cross, again. "It's still hot, if you're hungry."

Elisabeth nodded, let her briefcase fall to the ground, and burst into tears. Manuela rushed forward to take the other woman in her arms, almost expecting to be pushed away. But Elisabeth did not want her away this time. She wanted her against her, around her, within her, and she all but melted against her, burying her head in the crook of her neck. Manuela felt her own eyes well up and she did not push the tears away, instead letting them fall in silence as her sobbing wife clutched desperately at her shoulders. Such outbursts were uncommon, if not completely unthinkable from the ever-collected woman, and Manuela, in spite of her own heartache, could not help but think that the dismissal was not the only reason behind Elisabeth's distress. She decided not to press the matter yet, and simply only held the woman more tightly until she had no tears left to cry and her body felt limp in her arms. After a long while, Elisabeth finally lifted her head and turned away to avoid her gaze.

"Don't look at me, I must look appalling," she chuckled wetly.

"No you don't," Manuela whispered, taking her face gently into her hands.

"Oh love, no," Elisabeth exclaimed when she saw the wet tracks that

had run down Manuela's own cheeks. "Forgive me. I should never have snapped at you this way."

In turn, she cupped Manuela's cheeks and let her thumb wipe a lone tear away.

"Don't apologise to me," Manuela said almost fiercely, setting her jaw to keep further tears at bay. "I'm the one who should ask for forgiveness. And seeing you like this is simply unbearable. I hate feeling so powerless. I wish there was something I could do or-"

"Don't," Elisabeth shushed her, pressing the pad of her thumb against her lips to stop the rambling. "I don't feel like talking about this tonight. I've had enough."

The younger woman nodded, still uncertain but willing to respect her wife's boundaries.

"Let's have dinner, then."

"I don't want dinner," Elisabeth whispered. She leant in, pressing her lips firmly against her lover's who responded in earnest almost instantly. This was yet another side of Elisabeth that Manuela rarely got to see, but one she was more than happy to explore, she pondered as teeth bit into her lower lip. Manuela gasped in surprise, breaking the kiss for a second before Elisabeth's mouth was on hers again, demanding and relentless. This sort of open eagerness was unlike her, to say the least. The younger woman was always the most assertive of both, and she was perfectly comfortable with initiating intimate moments, even at the most inappropriate times. Where Manuela was often painfully obvious and unequivocal, Elisabeth was much more subtle. She appreciated seduction and the thrill that came with being pursued, and Manuela was always glad to oblige. Under any other circumstances Elisabeth's insistence tonight probably would have scared Manuela, or at least slightly concerned her, but she was too far gone to care. If asked, she even would have admitted without shame that such considerations were the furthest thing from her mind when

Elisabeth's hips were pushing urgently against hers and her soft, pliant lips were devouring hers in yearning. She suddenly felt a shiver run down her spine, and realised after a beat that it was not from the embrace –although it could as well have been- but because she simply felt cold. The contrast between the surprisingly cool air and the heated skin of her neck and chest became most noticeable, and most unpleasant, and it drew her attention long enough for her to break the embrace for the second time. Looking down, she almost choked when she realised that the reason behind the sudden chilliness was that her shirt was now unbuttoned all the way down.

"Oh?" was the only word she could utter.

"Yes," Elisabeth confirmed with an eager nod, before she claimed her lips once again and pushed the shirt from her shoulders completely. Manuela sighed against her mouth and seized Elisabeth by the waist, drawing her in with her towards the bedroom as their lips remained locked together.

"How do you feel?" Manuela's voice, still hoarse and raspy, resounded in the recently quiet room.

She felt Elisabeth chuckle in her arms before she heard her.

"Good. Exhausted. Sated," she hummed against her chest.

"Quite the achievement for a woman who has not eaten since lunchtime."

"Oh, but I have," Elisabeth said, playfully biting the underside of a breast and making Manuela laugh in return.

"I meant to ask… How do you feel about today?" the young woman asked again, suddenly quite serious.

Elisabeth stiffened against her, and Manuela made sure to tighten her

hold to prevent her from turning away.

"Don't do this," she pleaded. "You always berate me for keeping my feelings bottled up. Now you're doing the same."

"And you always argue that not all emotions can be properly voiced, nor do they need to be."

"What do I know, after all? Please, Elisabeth… Darling," she pushed again, searching for the other woman's eyes in the darkness.

"I have no desire to talk or think about this. Not tonight. I just want to sleep."

Manuela sighed, knowing that there would be no progress on the matter tonight but vowing to try again in the morning. So she only lied back against the pillows and let her fingers run through Elisabeth's hair in a calming motion.

"Goodnight, then," she whispered.

"Goodnight Manuela," Elisabeth replied, closing her eyes and hoping her beloved's soft heartbeat against her ear would be enough to lull her to sleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Notes: First off, I realised a few days backs that I had totally messed last update by submitting a draft chapter with 1) random characters names, 2) duplicate text. I fixed it in the meantime but you might want to re-read it if you thought it looked really stupid the first time. Bottom line, I need a beta!
>
> Also, I will be bumping the rating to M from now on, not because it's supposed to get particularly steamy in the future or anything, but just to be on the safe side.

6. Chapter 6

The front door opened unceremoniously, making Elisabeth almost jump out of her skin and drop the kettle she was holding in the same breath.

"Must you always be so rough?" she admonished, smiling in spite of herself as she waited for Manuela's cheeky retort. Instead however, she was startled to hear another familiar inflection.

"This is the sort of information I wish you would just keep to yourself," snapped the voice from right behind her.

Elisabeth whipped around and came face to face with her sister, who was standing by the kitchen's doorway with her hands on her hips.

"What are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing? You make it sound like you did not simply barge your way into my kitchen… And goodness, Ida, this hat!" the older sibling exclaimed.

Ida ignored the remark altogether and walked to where her sister was standing, kissing her cheek soundly as a greeting.

"Is it sanitary? It looks like a pheasant died up here," Elisabeth insisted, visibly concerned.

"You, sister dear, are a philistine. I'll have you know that this is *dernier cri*. But I don't expect your provincial self to know this, of course."

The eldest shook her head and chuckled at the harmless jab. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, in some cases."

"Anyway," Ida sighed. "Why are you not ready yet?"

"But I am," Elisabeth blinked. "Ready for a cup of tea and a well-deserved early bedtime."

"Oh no… Please tell me you did not forget."

The older woman frowned, trying to remember what random event her sister could possibly be referring to this time. A vague memory of an "important reception, with important people" came up, and she shrugged dismissively.

"I never said I would attend. You know how I dislike these parties."

"I was counting on you," Ida whined, stomping her foot like a petulant child. "Ah, I knew I should have asked Georges. He is a tad coarse but he passes as acceptable as long as he keeps his mouth shut. I simply cannot attend without company –whatever will people think of me?"

"That you are a free spirit, maybe."

"No, this won't do. Manuela cannot desert me, I'm taking her along whether she likes it or not," Ida threatened.

"What about this Georges fellow? Maybe it's not too late to get in touch with him…"

"Oh, you are not going to pull the 'quiet evening together' trick on me tonight," Ida said with finality. "Besides Manuela is a lot better looking and more articulate."

Elisabeth considered protesting, but she simply shrugged and held out her hand to offer her sister a seat. She had a point.

"Too much for her own good, apparently… Well, you'll have to ask her when she comes back. Care for a cup?"

Ida nodded and pulled a chair, watching in silence as her sister's nightgown-clad figure moved about the room. To the untrained eye, she appeared perfectly untroubled, but there was a certain edge to her movements that did not fool the younger woman. Elisabeth poured them both a cup, her hand steady and her face ever so stoic. It was unusual for her to notice the crack in the façade Elisabeth maintained, and if she was honest, it was somewhat alarming. Her older sister had always been the strongest of them both. It was an immutable fact. Ida had always been the emotional mess and Elisabeth was the soldier, as well as her anchor and her shield. It did not mean that Elisabeth felt no emotions; simply that she had long mastered the art of hiding it. The sisters sat facing each other, a mirror *of contradictions,* and exchanged amused looks over their steaming mugs.

"Is this really your definition of an ideal Friday evening?" Ida asked after a while.

"I can assure you that it is perfectly healthy, Ida. You should try it sometimes."

"Maybe in about 40 years," the other scoffed. "But really… How have you been?"

Elisabeth did not answer right away, instead bringing her own cup to her lips to blow on the scalding liquid before she took a careful sip. "Fine. Yes, things have been just fine."

"Right. You know, you don't need to sugar-coat things for me, Elisabeth, dear. I'm not Manuela."

The older woman set down her cup, her eyes dangerously possessive.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"That it's been a fortnight since you lost your job and you refuse to talk about it. And she's worried about you."

"Has she said so?"

"She hasn't, but you should know by now that I'm not a complete idiot and can sense these things. Manuela is not a baby, Elisabeth. She doesn't need protection."

"I know that," Elisabeth hissed, outraged at the implication. "I'm not hiding anything from her. She is just so busy –I don't want her to agonise over it. You know how she can get."

"But she *is* in agony. Do you mean to tell me that what happened has had no impact on you? This is already ancient story –is that what we are supposed to believe?"

"I have made my peace with it. Sorry to disappoint."

"You were always a very bad liar," Ida tsked. She rose to her feet and headed straight to the kitchen cabinet.

"What now?" Elisabeth sighed, watching her sister rummage through the cupboards.

"I'm looking for the hard liquor. I swear it helps, for quite a lot of things."

"I don't require any help and certainly not- what are you doing?" Elisabeth screeched, pushing away the bottle of whiskey that her sister had managed to retrieve and pour a large amount of in her cup in the blink of an eye.

"You know, it would be good if you stopped acting like such a prude from time to time. After all, you have eloped to another continent with a girl half your age, as Manuela likes to remind you. For all intents and purposes, you are nothing but a prude," Ida smiled, lifting her cup in the air for a toast.

Elisabeth rolled her eyes, but still clicked her own cup with her sister's and took a long sip. "Can you imagine Mother's face if she saw

us now?"

This made Ida almost choke on her drink and she let out what sounded like half a laugh, half a cough.

"Good lord! Drinking whiskey in the kitchen, no husband or offspring on the horizon… You a shameless Sapphic, me a vulgar entertainer. I'm surprised she hasn't crawled back from the dead yet to give us a piece of her mind."

It was not often that the sisters mentioned their mother and when they did, it was rarely in fond terms. Often, the memories were prompted by Manuela who was always so eager to hear saucy stories about younger Elisabeth. Over the years, she had learnt not to push the matter too far as she had come to understand that the woman's cruelty had been the cause of many torments throughout their young years. As for their father, he seemed to have been a fair and decent man, but his piousness had blinded upon learning of Elisabeth's "deviance". Even though the memories were still painful for the most part, laughing it off seemed easier these days, as it almost felt like all of it had happened in another life.

"So. Am I going to have to worm it out of you?" Ida asked, breaking the spell without realising. Of course, she expected the other woman to deny the evidence yet again, and was not at all prepared for the admission that followed.

"Fine! I feel humiliated. These people have rendered me useless and I despise it. I despise them, and I am beginning to despise this place," Elisabeth burst out, making her sister recoil in her seat.

"Do you mean –what? Do you mean you would rather go back?"

"No –I don't know. This is impossible, anyway… I simply don't belong here. I thought I had found my place, and it turned out to be nothing but a chimera."

"Elisabeth, you're not thinking clearly. No one ever said it was easy to settle in another country…"

"It's been years," Elisabeth interrupted dryly. "You and Manuela had no difficulty. But it's not the same with you artists. You see the world differently…"

"You are an artist too! Just because you refuse to paint –why is that anyway?"

"Oh please, Ida. Painting doesn't pay the rent. Not here at least. Not my paintings," Elisabeth spat and downed the rest of her drink without ceremony.

"The rent is not an issue and you know it."

"It's not. Everything else is. And I am being selfish on top of it all. You cannot tell Manuela about this," she pointed a severe finger at her sister. "I am serious Ida, not a word."

"Why not? Maybe this is exactly what she needs to hear!"

"And what would it change? We have rebuilt a life here, and I know how good she feels. Knowing that I don't would devastate her. Not to mention I am the one who uprooted her. We are here in the first place because I decided so, and she left everything behind for me."

"Elisabeth…," the singer said calmly. "If we'd let things go as planned, she would be married to an idiot, and so would I, probably. And maybe you would still be in that convent father so graciously locked you in. Not to mention in a country where war is raging. Coming here was the best thing that could ever happen to Manuela and frankly, to all of us. But there are no rules against longing for your homeland. Surely, she would understand if you told her."

"Manuela hasn't heard of her brother in over a year. She has no idea if he's even still alive. She has lost contact with all of her remaining family members, with all of her friends…" Elisabeth choked, and the memory of Bertram and Erika von Kleist's juvenile faces suddenly brought tears to her eyes. "How could I complain? The only things I

have left are you and her, and I have you both right here."

"Yes. And she has us too, alright? She has us," Ida stammered.

Ida didn't wait for her sister to acquiesce and she stood up, throwing her arms around the other woman's neck in a surge of affection at the same moment the front door flew open for the second time this evening.

"Are you hugging without me?" Manuela whined indignantly upon stepping into the kitchen.

"Quick, come join!" Ida ordered, waving at Manuela without breaking the embrace. "Elisabeth is about to combust from too much contact."

Manuela did not need to be told twice and wrapped her arms around her sister-in-law and wife, kissing the latter's lips without much restraint.

"How are you, darling?" Elisabeth asked, laughing between kisses.

"Perfect now," Manuela whispered.

It wasn't long before Ida extricated herself from the hug and looked at the two lovers with an accusative glare.

"Why do you always have to turn perfectly chaste moments into something filthy?"

Instead of replying, Elisabeth planted another long kiss right on Manuela's waiting lips for good measure.

"My sister wants you to accompany her to a… reception of some sort."

"I've been officially appointed to sing a few songs of my repertoire at the British embassy, to be precise. Something you would know if you listened to half of what I say," Ida chastised, and it was aimed at both

women still embracing without a care in the world.

"Was it tonight? I'm exhausted, Ida," Manuela groaned and looked at Elisabeth. "You're not going, are you?"

"Certainly not. But it would be nice of you to attend. If only because it would be the first time for Ida attending a soirée with such a dashing partner at her arm," Elisabeth said, winking at her sister who scoffed indignantly.

"For the record, I have a recital next Saturday that none of you are allowed to miss or forget. Do I need to have an invite formally sent out to you?"

Manuela ignored her and wrapped her arms more snuggly around her wife instead. "Are you sure you don't mind staying alone tonight?"

"Don't worry about me. I will probably be out like a light as soon as I get into bed."

At that, Manuela smirked and leant forward to whisper something into Elisabeth's ear, who feebly swatted her arm with an embarrassed chuckle that made Ida shudder in disgust.

"Anyway!" she drawled out. "We're leaving in ten, kid."

"We can go now, I'm ready."

"No, you're not. You're going to run a brush through your hair and put on a dress for once, please and thank you."

Manuela threw a disgruntled look towards Elisabeth, hoping for some support, but her wife did not seem inclined to help this time.

"I think freshening up a little would not hurt, darling…"

"Fine. I'll be right back," Manuela growled, and disappeared into the bathroom.

True to herself, she was out a few minutes later, dressed in a long-sleeved navy tunic, a long string of pearls around her neck and a cigarette dangling from her lips.

"Ready when you are, love," she said, extending her arm for Ida to take. Instead, the older woman slapped the cigarette off her mouth, making Manuela yelp in outrage.

"I won't have you smoke in front of the deputy ambassador!"

"Oh, I get it now," Manuela exclaimed in realisation. "Must I remind you that the bloke is married?"

"I *know* that. I simply don't want him to think we are frivolous women."

"Well –I am," the young comedian shrugged, reaching down to retrieve her cigarette, and lighting it before her sister-in-law could protest. "Good evening, darling."

"Good evening," Elisabeth said, drawing Manuela closer for a kiss. "Don't cause trouble. Both of you."

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thanks a bunch for your lovely comments, DMs, kudos and stuff, you guys feed my soul and I'm not even kidding. Also, sorry notsorry for the Scooby-Doo reference at the end, it just, you know, happened.

Manuela tried to stifle another massive yawn and scanned the room, desperate to locate her sister-in-law. Ida had mysteriously disappeared without notice after singing her one and only aria of the evening, leaving Manuela to deal with a bunch of showy old fogeys who wanted to know if she was looking for company. She thought of Elisabeth who was probably asleep by now, and sighed in frustration. Her feet were killing her and even the champagne did little to brighten her mood. A waiter walked past her with a tray full of canapés and she took two without ceremony. If she was going to die from boredom, she might as well do it with her stomach full.

A tap against her shoulder drew her attention, and as she whirled around, she was relieved to see that it was Ida leaning closer to her.

"Where have you *been*?" she hissed. "It's been hours! I want to go home."

"In a minute. Don't look just yet- I said *don't* look," Ida hissed, grabbing Manuela's arm to prevent her from turning around. "See the woman in the crimson dress out on the balcony?"

The young actress gave her a dirty look.

"Alright, be discreet then!" Ida rolled her eyes, and released the grip on her arm.

"Hm, what about her?" Manuela asked after a quick glance at the woman in question.

"Have you ever seen her anywhere?"

"Not that I can recall, no. Why?"

"This is Doug's wife."

"Whose wife?"

"Do keep up, please. Douglas Henderson. The deputy…"

"-British ambassador. Right," the young woman finished, unimpressed. "Why should I know her then?"

"She hasn't stopped scrutinizing me all night… I have an awkward sensation."

Manuela just shrugged, seizing another flute of champagne from a nearby tray.

"Weren't you with her husband just now? I really cannot imagine why she could be pissed at you," she exclaimed, pressing a hand to her chest in mock consternation.

"I wasn't *with* him!" Ida growled, scandalised. "We talked –I talked to a lot of people this evening. You know, actually, you too could have used this opportunity to rub elbows with the top of the crop instead of just standing there like a lemon, stuffing your face with toasts."

"I don't care about rubbing elbows with anybody; my only wish right now is to go home to my wife and take off these shoes."

"How ambitious of you! Anyway this woman... I knew she felt familiar the first time I saw her. I can't manage to replace her, though. But she is not looking at me like a suspecting spouse, it's something else."

"Then what? Probably a mere admirer of your voice. Or your hat."

"You think you're absolutely hilarious, don't you? Oh drat, she's coming towards us!" Ida yelped. From the corner of her eye, she could see the woman steadily walking closer and on impulse, she let her head fall back, laughing as if Manuela had cracked the most comical joke she had heard in years.

"Oh, dear, you are going to be the death of me," she roared, pushing Manuela's shoulder so hard that it almost sent her into a wobble.

"So this is where the life of the party had been hiding all along, and I only find out just now," the mysterious woman said with an amused smile. "Mind if I join in?"

"Please do," Ida agreed a bit too easily.

"Congratulations for the lovely performance, dear. It was enchanting." Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned to Manuela and extended her hand. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. I am Katarina Henderson."

Manuela took the offered hand and gave it a firm shake. From where she was standing, this woman did not appear to be quite as threatening as Ida seemed to think.

"A pleasure, Mrs Henderson. Manuela von Meinhardis."

"And what do you do?"

"Tonight, I am naught but dear Ida's escort. A truly beautiful singer indeed, but who needs to be chaperoned at all times," she stage-whispered, earning a hearty chuckle from the woman.

"Aren't you a delight, Miss von Meinhardis," the woman said, and then looking down at her ring finger, she quickly corrected herself. "Oh, I'm sorry. Mrs… I shouldn't have assumed. Prussian husband?"

Manuela let out a nervous laugh. "Uh yes… Prussian through and through, the both of us."

"And what about you, dear?" the woman asked, her eyes now boring into Ida.

Ida blinked, unsure of what question she was being asked, exactly. "No husband, Prussian or otherwise."

"Hm, a shame," Mrs Henderson said, eyeing her from head to toe with an undecipherable expression.

The air seemed to turn thick with tension, and Manuela decided to cut through it without preamble. The sooner this was settled, the sooner they would leave.

"Actually, Ida was just marvelling at how awfully familiar you looked," she blurted, ignoring her sister-in-law's muffled protest.

"Oh really? If I'm not mistaken, dear, we have already met," the woman drawled, her smile turning a little murderous. "I know I don't have a particularly noteworthy physique –unlike my husband- but I believe our first meeting was a mere couple of months ago, was it not?"

Ida tittered, trying to defuse her growing embarrassment and Manuela nearly snorted as she surveyed the woman closely. She was tall, almost monarchical, maybe only a few years older than Ida. All fiery red hair, and bright emerald eyes, she was extremely beautiful, and very obviously aware of it. Manuela wondered what could be hiding behind this barely concealed hypocrisy, and just like that, she decided that she did not like this woman, not in the least.

"No-yes, of course," Ida stammered in a desperate attempt to save face. "I remember our previous meeting quite well. I might have exchanged a bit more pleasantries with your husband and you and I did not get the chance to talk properly until now…" she stumbled over the words, much to Mrs Henderson's delight. At that moment, it downed on Ida then that she was only digging herself deeper. "At any rate. I was merely suggesting, and this is to be taken with a tiny grain of salt, that you looked familiar from before."

"Is that so? And when would *before* be?"

"I-I honestly don't know," Ida hesitated. And then, she decided that it was time to stake it all. "You did mention Russia, didn't you?"

"Indeed."

"Well, seeing as I have never been, and I am quite sure that you have not conveniently omitted a letter from your actual country of origin like you could have, in these dark times, I think that I must have mistaken you for someone else."

If Manuela thought the exchange had been cold before, she almost shivered as she stood back and watched the two women appraise each other in silent defiance.

"That settles it, then," the ambassador's wife finally let out with a tight-lipped smile. "I won't take up any more of your time, ladies. It was lovely talking to you, Mrs von Meinhardis. Miss von Bernburg," she said with one last pointed look at Ida, and turned on her heels without another word.

Manuela and Ida both watched the other woman retreat, puzzled but quite frankly pleased to finally be seeing the back of her.

"Darn it. That was uncomfortable," the younger woman cringed.

"And thank *you* for contributing, dork," Ida snarled, punching Manuela's shoulder not too gently.

"Don't take it out on me. At least now we can leave. I don't think I can stand breathing the same air as these dusty snobs any longer. Please, tell me we're going."

The singer pursed her lips and nodded, to Manuela's relief.

"Fine, let's call it a night. I've had enough as well."

Ida bid farewell to a few people around the room, carefully avoiding the notorious deputy ambassador and his wife and before long, she and Manuela were heading down the reception hall stairs.

"Free at last!" Manuela exhaled as they made their way through the busy Manhattan streets. "I understand why Elisabeth remains carefully away from these events. What a bore! Actually were you – you know, able to talk to her?"

Ida glanced at the young woman who was looking at her with a hopeful smile and she felt her heart break slightly. She tended to forget how young she still was, most of the time, but there were fleeting moments like these where her greenness stood out a mile. It was easy to understand why Elisabeth felt the instinctive need to protect her, even though Manuela would probably despise the idea, if she only knew. Ida threw her arm around her shoulders and drew her closer, considering the best answer she could give without betraying her sister's trust.

"She's still coping, obviously. But she's strong, our Elisabeth. Just give it time, yes?"

"I suppose, yes... I'll be patient. And take good care of her."

Ida could not help but smile fondly at this. She hoped one day someone would love her in the same sickeningly sweet way that Manuela loved her sister-and the other way around.

"So, this Mrs Henderson… A piece of work, right? She turned white as a sheet when you mentioned Prussia. She's no more Russian than you and I."

"Yes, that much is clear," Ida mused. "Would explain where I know her from. A pity I still can't for the life of me remember just *who* she is."

Manuela made a great show of tapping her chin in reflection. "You'd better mull it over. Because it looks like she, for one, remembers

exactly who you are… Ida, it looks like we have a mystery on our hands."

Ida chortled, but still, as they both made their way into the night, she could not shake the feeling of uneasiness that had settled deep within her.

8. Chapter 8

Elisabeth hurried across the animated streets, pulling the collar of her coat even higher to shield herself from the surprisingly glacial October wind. Tonight would take place the long-awaited recital Ida had been raving about for months, and Elisabeth was far from sharing her sister's excitement at the prospect. It had been agreed that she would meet Manuela at the theatre after her rehearsal and that they would walk straight to the concert hall together. The promise of a night out with Manuela, particularly for an event that meant so much to her sister would have normally filled her with joy. But not tonight. Tonight, saying that Elisabeth was in a foul mood would have been an understatement.

After yet another day of fruitless enquiries at institutes and schools of all shapes and sizes, and countless hours spent at the employment agency, so far in vain, she was starting to believe that she would never get to work ever again and would instead have to sponge off her wife and sister until the end of her existence. Like each time, she had put on her most resolute and professional façade and asked if, perhaps, they might be looking for a teacher or would be in the near future, and like each time, she had been met with the same, invariable refusal. Upon arguing that she was also well-versed in *non-German* literature and perfectly capable of teaching a variety of other subjects, as her certificates could attest, she had been given the usual stiff smile, and a promise to consider her application if the need arose. At times, Elisabeth felt like the problem came from her altogether and tonight was one of these times. In the end, maybe she was not fit to teach; maybe she was simply inadequate and was only coming to this sad realisation now, at almost 40. These doubts that now plagued her more often than not would make her mind inevitably wander to imagining a future with Manuela, brilliant and thriving in her art, and herself, increasingly old, bitter and dependent. The younger woman, of course, was nothing short of supportive and encouraging, and even had gone as far as to ask Gerhardt Jensen to hire Elisabeth as a drama teacher for future comedians at the theatre. The man had been enchanted at the idea.

Elisabeth, true to herself, had been outraged and rejected the possibility. At first, Manuela had been displeased, to say the least. She simply was unable to comprehend why her wife insisted on making things so difficult, but she also knew that, for all her good sense, Elisabeth was also extremely proud and stubborn. This was one of their many common traits, but also one of the most infuriating.

As soon as she reached the theatre, Elisabeth decided to let herself in directly through the small door at the back of the building leading to the dressing rooms, unwilling to wait in the cold for longer than was necessary. It would not be the first time, anyway. Upon stepping inside, she was almost startled to see a young blonde woman standing in the narrow corridor and holding a red metal box against her chest in a death grip. She had never seen her around before. The woman turned to her and gave her an enthusiastic smile that Elisabeth attempted to return as politely as possible. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, the blonde woman –a girl, really- looked at her again, still beaming.

"Are you waiting for the comedians?" she asked, and Elisabeth noticed how lovely, and how young she looked. She was probably around Manuela's age, and the idea made her strangely uncomfortable.

"One in particular, yes."

"Yes… So am I," the girl sighed, waving her metal box as if to prove a point. "Manuela is amazing, isn't she?"

Elisabeth flinched at hearing her wife's name in the blonde woman's mouth and her smile turned into something a lot less agreeable. "I suppose she is, yes."

"Whenever I see her onstage, I forget everything. She's so –so magnetic, you see. There's no one quite like her," she continued, oblivious to Elisabeth's struggle to maintain her composure.

"Do you come here often?" she could not help but enquire.

"As much as I possibly can! Today's rehearsal was amazing."

"Is that so," Elisabeth simply hissed through gritted teeth, and let silence settle heavily between them once more.

"Look, I'm sorry to ask, but I need to go and I don't think I'll get to see her before I leave," the young woman said after a while, biting her lower lip in the most irritating way. "Would you mind giving this to her? I think they're her favourite."

Elisabeth looked down at the box that was pushed into her hands. A box of chocolate. She nodded mutely, and the girl's smile grew even wider.

"Tell her this is from Abigail," she thought important to specify. "Thank you so much! Goodbye"

And with that, she was gone, leaving a positively seething Elisabeth behind. A few minutes later, a door flew open and a lively group of well-known faces walked past her, each one greeting her with various levels of familiarity. As expected, Manuela was the last to walk through the door. She was slightly out of breath and her eyes were shining with the satisfaction she usually harboured after a most gratifying day of work. She beamed when she spotted Elisabeth. Elisabeth did not.

"What a sight for sore eyes! Listen, I just need to change very quickly and then I'm all yours," she started, but her lopsided grin progressively fell as she noticed the wrath written all across her wife's face. "Are you alright, love?"

"Fantastic," Elisabeth answered curtly, and pushed something against hard her stomach that Manuela seized on instinct.

"For me?"

The other woman nodded and finally smiled back, as cold as ice. "From Abigail."

Manuela frowned. She knew no Abigail. Except for this girl who often came around with her arms full of gifts and the embarrassingly obvious torch she was bearing for her –oh, this Abigail, then.

"She says these are your favourites. I hope you enjoy them," Elisabeth spat and, without waiting for an answer, stormed outside.

The recital, overall, had been a pleasant affair. Ida has sung exceptionally and the crowd had been swayed, as expected. It had been far less enjoyable for Manuela, however, who had spent the evening clutching at Elisabeth's hand in despair, anxious to assure her of her undying love and devotion. It hadn't taken long for her to catch up with the woman in the street, although she had managed to forget her coat in her haste. She had dragged her into a narrow street, ready to fall to her knees and beg for forgiveness –for what exactly, she wasn't sure. But Elisabeth had been quicker, mumbled incoherent words of apology and assured that she was not mad at her, but at everything else. No further mention of the incident had been made as they had strolled silently together to the opera house, but Manuela's incessant glances had betrayed her concern. Admittedly, Elisabeth was not exempt of flaws, but jealousy had never been one of them. Manuela was the jealous one, the one who would get into a fight without a second of hesitation if anyone so much as looked at Elisabeth for too long. Whenever Manuela was on the receiving end of someone else's advanced, however, the other woman rarely ever showed any sort of reaction and when she did, it was often amusement as she stood back and watched Manuela extricate herself from the situation as graciously as she could. By all means, Manuela had never seen her as blindly enraged as she had been tonight.

"Are you going to stay here all evening?" Elisabeth's voice interrupted her musings, and Manuela blinked at the lights that were now back on. Had she really been ruminating so much that she had missed the curtain call?

"Well, that was beautiful," she announced, undeterred, and got on her feet.

"I could hear the wheels turning in your head throughout the whole show," the older woman chastised softly, getting up as well, and they started making their way outside of the auditorium. "Stop being so anxious."

"Then stop giving me reasons to be."

Elisabeth linked arms with Manuela, and let her other hand travel up to give Manuela's upper arm a loving squeeze.

"I truly am sorry," she said sincerely. "I behaved in the most ridiculous way."

"For once, I am afraid I have to agree with you. Utterly ridiculous."

"Don't push it," Elisabeth laughed.

"You do trust me, don't you?" Manuela insisted, forcing Elisabeth to look at her. "You do know that there is nothing between me and anyone who isn't you, nor could there ever be?"

"Of course, my darling. Of course, I do."

"If you ever forget, I will make sure to remind you, over, and over again," the younger woman murmured, and the huskiness of her voice made Elisabeth shiver.

"We should probably hurry and give Ida her our well-deserved congratulations. Then as we get home, you can start reminding me."

Manuela had to stop herself from leaning forward and kissing the other woman with the passion she felt bubbling within her. "Let's be quick about it, then. We haven't brought any flowers, though. Do you think she will let us in?"

At that, Elisabeth only laughed and led them both upstairs, circulating easily through the crowd.

When they reached the diva's dressing room, they didn't even have to knock as the door was already wide open. Ida, still in her heavy concert gown, was busy hugging a tall gentleman who was wearing very stylish and presumably very expensive suit. As could be expected, the small room was already overflowing with flowers and a few bottles of champagne had been popped open.

"And there she is, the prima donna," Manuela exclaimed, letting herself in without waiting for an invitation. "*Bravissima*!"

"I must dash," the man hurriedly said, nodding at the two women who had just entered the room. "Let me take you out for lunch sometimes next week."

"I'll hold you to it, honey. Bye-bye," Ida waved happily, before she threw her arms around her sister-in-law's neck. "This was Georges."

"Don't tell me. Big bucks, personality of a shoehorn," Manuela teased, earning a playful smack in return.

"You were amazing, dear sister of mine," Elisabeth congratulated as she stepped between the two bickering women. "Manuela loved the Bellini, didn't you darling?"

The comedian looked perplexed for a moment, unable to remember a single aria Ida had sung.

"Yes! That was –quite frankly Ida, that was fabulous."

"Oh, stop it! But thank you. Just for that, I won't say a word about you not even bothering to change out of your theatre rags before my recital."

The two other women exchanged a slightly guilty look, but did not comment on the matter.

"Anyway, you will stay for the after party, right?" Ida commanded more than she asked.

"Actually, Elisabeth is rather tired. We were hoping for an early night…"

"Nonsense!" the singer interrupted. "I even managed to get the Hendersons to come. I had to apologize for the other night's *misunderstanding*, and you can imagine that I didn't do it gladly. But if it's what it takes to avoid a gigantic diplomatic incident and be in the wife's good books, so be it."

"I am impressed by your maturity, Ida. We won't be staying for too long," Elisabeth said pointedly.

Before Ida could complain, she spotted the couple she had just been talking about over her sister's shoulder. Douglas looked his usual dashing self, and Katarina was splendid in a long golden evening gown, holding a disproportionate bouquet of white roses in her arms which Ida supposed was meant for her. Mechanically, she looked between the woman walking towards them and Elisabeth who was standing in front of her, and the abrupt realisation struck her like a bolt of lightning. Everything clicked into place, and she blanched.

"Ida? Are you alright?" her sister enquired, her voice laced with sudden concern.

"Elisabeth… I think you need to go."

Notes for the Chapter:

> Phew, yeah, I know :) For the record, I have Marie Kondo'ed the hell out of the previous chapters and attempted to seriously proofread it, so don't be surprised if you notice any changes -hopefully they're for the best.

9. Chapter 9

Ida emerged from a fitful slumber with her head pounding most viciously and her tongue dry in her mouth. She groaned, hiding her face in her pillow to avoid the merciless rays of sunshine assaulting her from behind the blinds. She waited, motionless for a while in the hopes that the throbbing would go away and the room would stop spinning. She wished for nothing more than to go back to sleep, or die, in no particular order of preference. Her treacherous mind, however, seemed otherwise inclined, instead conjuring confused and unsolicited bits of memories from the night before.

“Make it stop,” she yelled to no one in particular, and winced at the sound of her cavernous voice.

How she had even been able to make it home last night, drunk and on her own, was an absolute wonder. Unless… With great effort, she rolled on her back and proceeded to slap the other side of the bed with a clumsy arm, relieved when she felt no sign of another human being under the blankets. Thank Heavens. Her splitting headache and confused state were enough already without adding to it unpleasant conversation with whomever she would have found enticing enough last night to bring home with her. With great effort, she extricated herself from under the rumpled sheets, willing herself to briefly open her eyes purely for safety considerations as she groped her way towards the bathroom. Once there, she fumbled for the sink and splashed some water onto her face, hoping it would help clear her fuzzy mind to some extent. She chanced a look at her blurry, dishevelled reflection in the mirror and gasped in horror.

“Some socialite you are,” she sighed, almost hearing Manuela’s voice in her head as she did. The idea of the younger woman seeing her in this state drew a tired chuckled from her lips, but it quickly turned into a gasp of terror. Manuela. Elisabeth…

She staggered back to her bedroom and threw her exhausted body

over the mattress once more, rubbing her pulsing temples and willing herself to organise the mess of information jumbling in her head. She remembered the concert, the thrill that had come with the heated applause and praise, and the champagne. A lot of it. Fighting back a wave of nausea, Ida swore solemnly to herself that she would never drink again. This time, she meant it. As began dozing off again, someone's face flashed in her mind and her eyes shot open. Katarina Henderson –or von Bremen, as she had first known her, a lifetime ago. Elisabeth's dearest friend, and much, much, more. The one who had ruined her sister's life, almost beyond repair. Ida attempted to sit upright, finally overcome with vivid memories of what exactly had happened the night before.

As the terrible realisation of whom was walking towards her and, more alarmingly, her sister downed on her, Ida barely had a second to think before she threw herself body and soul against the door, slamming it shut in the process.

"Ida! Are you out of your mind?" Elisabeth gasped.

"Sorry darlings, but you can't see me like this," Ida yelled through the door, ignoring her sister altogether. "I need to powder my nose, arrange my hair… You know how it is. Please wait for me in the ball room, I'll only be a minute."

She could not make out any clear answer but she assumed after a moment that the Hendersons had done just as they were told, and that the coast was clear. She turned to face Elisabeth and Manuela, a look of triumph on her face.

"Right, you two… You need to go!" she commanded without further ado.

"Good grief! A minute ago you were begging us to stay and now you're throwing us away?" Manuela huffed.

Ida bit her lip, considering her next move with great care.

“Manuela, have you seen yourself? It was all fine in the darkness where no one could see you, but I can’t be seen with you hovering around me all evening looking like a street urchin! I have a reputation to uphold.”

Manuela’s eyebrows rose comically.

“You little… I look fine! Don’t I?” Manuela turned to Elisabeth, who simply tilted her head to the side, a sign that she was both endeared, and infuriatingly so, in agreement with her sister.

“Or maybe you want to spend the evening with a certain married gentleman, and no longer require our company,” Manuela accused.

“Yes, yes, whatever you say. Now, get out of here!”

Again, Manuela turned to Elisabeth for support. “Your sister is very rude.”

“Possibly the understatement of the year. Enjoy your evening, Ida. I will go hide my repulsive wife away from the gentry’s sensitive eyes,” Elisabeth chuckled, and dragged Manuela away by the hand, all too happy to be exempted from mingling with the upper class tonight.

With the two women finally gone, Ida let out a sigh of relief. This had been easier than expected, she thought, pleased with her astonishing negotiation skills. Now, she had Katarina to deal with, and she would need to use her natural charm to find out about the woman’s hidden agenda. She glanced at herself in the mirror, deciding that her nose definitely did not need any powdering and her hair did not need any fixing, and she left the room, fully confident in her ability to manage the situation. Stepping into the ballroom, she extended her arms in the most pompous way, revelling in the cheers and claps she was welcomed with. Well, the people loved her, there was no need for modesty.

“Finally. We almost thought you were avoiding us,” a voice commented in her ear.

She was not surprised to come face to face with Doug, who was sporting a dazzling smile and holding a flute of champagne that he immediately pushed towards her.

“You were amazing, dear, as always,” Katarina praised, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. She was smiling as well, but it was almost feral.

For all her former confidence, Ida suddenly felt incredibly uncomfortable standing so close to the woman whose identity she had only just figured out. She studied the proud features, and willed her own smile not to falter. How had she not recognised her the first few times? It might have been over twenty years since she’d last seen her, but the glimmer of mischief in the woman’s emerald eyes was unmistakably recognizable.

“Look at that. I’m almost out of champagne. I will be right back, ladies,” Douglas said and just like that, the two women were left alone.

Ida looked around anxiously, and pretended to wave at someone, desperate to avoid Katarina’s burning gaze.

“Are you nervous?”

“Am I? Why- no! Are you?” Ida stammered

“No,” the redheaded woman chuckled.

Ida attempted to laugh along, but it came out as a strangled cry. She needed to refocus and regain control of the situation, with calm and subtlety. She could do this.

“I hope we did not interrupt anything, earlier. You seemed to be in good company.”

Taken aback, Ida did the only thing that made sense to her at the moment. She downed her flute of champagne in one gulp, and narrowed her eyes threateningly.

“I know who you are!” she blurted. So much for subtlety.

She expected denial or outrage, but certainly not for the woman's grin to spread even wider.

"Good, then. I was beginning to think I would need to spell it out for you."

"What do you want from me?"

"From you? Nothing," she affirmed, and she sounded almost convincing.

"Then why are you here? What is the meaning of this?"

"I know this might sound peculiar, if not inconceivable, but our meeting is naught but a sheer coincidence. I was just as surprised as you are now when I realised who you were."

"You knew who I was from that very first day?" Ida asked, still suspicious.

For a second, Ida thought she saw something akin to nostalgia pass on the woman's face, but before she had time to ponder on it, the presumptuous smirk was back into place.

"You do take after your sister a lot…"

"S-stay away from my sister," Ida stammered, once again overwhelmed with panic. "You've done enough damage already."

Katarina had the elegance to look ashamed, and took a careful sip of her champagne.

"I don't wish her any harm. I never did," she finally admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"So you'll stay away from her?" Ida repeated, in desperate need of a confirmation.

"We're going back to London in two days. For ever, as far as I am concerned. I have seen enough of this country," the woman assured. "You

don't have to worry about me."

"Good –yes, this is for the best…"

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them and Ida eyed the crowd with unhindered impatience. Where on Earth had Douglas disappeared to? And what of Romberg? Was he so busy playing to the gallery that he could not spare a minute to save her from this predicament?

"This young comedian. Manuela, was it?"

Ida's head turned so sharply that her neck almost snapped. "What about her?"

"She's her lover, right?"

The singer could simply stare wide-eyed at the woman in front of her. She had some nerve.

"Again, I have no intention of causing trouble. I saw them walking down the stairs and they seemed rather… intimate."

Ida pursed her lips. Letting Katarina know of Elisabeth's happiness, in spite of all the trouble she had caused her, seemed like an interesting form of revenge and suddenly sounded very enticing. After all, the woman would be leaving for good in a few days. What was the worst that could happen?

"You're right. She is," Ida let out smugly.

"I see…" For a moment, Katarina seemed almost nauseous. "She's lovely. Elisabeth has always been a woman of taste."

This was the moment Douglas chose to materialise in front of them, carefully balancing not one but three bottles of champagne in his arms.

“Ah there you are,” Katarina said, forcing a smile. “You certainly took your sweet time.”

“I’m sorry, darling. It took forever to get my hands on these..." he said, nodding at the bottles he was cradling. "And now, let the good times roll.”

What had happened after that was still a bit hazy, but she remembered Katarina carefully avoiding mentioning Elisabeth any further for the rest of the evening, instead focusing all her intention on Manuela. Douglas had remained exceptionally quiet, looking between the two women with an air of mysterious interest and ensuring their glasses were never empty. Ida had been determined to remain intentionally vague when answering Katarina’s increasingly more specific questions about her sister-in-law, but her initial vigilance had worn off under the effect of champagne. Thinking back, now, she could not affirm that she had not provided Katarina with a detailed inventory of Manuela’s life, from early childhood to the present day. Lying in bed and left to deal with only the ugliest consequences of alcohol, Ida could not help but think that she should have been a bit less generous in her tales. She turned on her side and wondered if what had happened last night was something she ought to notify Elisabeth. If Katarina ever decided to get in touch with her, the fallout could be terrible. But her sister had to deal with her own struggles at the moment, and the other woman was leaving the country for good. Nodding to herself, she came to the decision that worrying her sister any further was out of the question. She had managed to avoid the worst and Katarina would soon be a distant memory, as she ought to be. Reclining back in her bed, still in pain but extremely satisfied with herself, Ida willed herself back to sleep, happy to never think of Katarina von Bremen ever again.

10. Chapter 10

February 1918

"What on *Earth* is this?" Elisabeth grimaced at the crumpled envelope that had just been thrown haphazardly over the kitchen counter.

"The week's wages," Manuela announced with a proud smile.

"And why is it soaking into my pea soup?"

The younger woman scrambled to pick up the proffered object, and quickly checked the integrity of its content.

"Sorry," she chuckled.

Elisabeth rolled her eyes indulgently and turned her attention back to the chopping board in front of her.

"Will you give me a hand, please? I'm running behind."

"Absolutely," Manuela said. She slid behind the woman and seized her hips with brash enthusiasm.

"This was not the sort of hand I was thinking of."

"Oh? It's the first one that came to mind," the actress replied, allowing said hand to roam slightly higher.

"Manuela, I am making dinner."

"No, you are not."

Before she could protest, the knife Elisabeth was holding was snatched from her and carefully placed back down on the counter.

"Very well. What has gotten into you, then?" she asked, turning into Manuela's embrace and letting her arms hook behind her neck quite naturally.

"No cooking tonight. I'm taking you out."

This made Elisabeth's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Whatever for?"

"Because we deserve it. Because I want to. And most importantly, because we don't need a reason."

"But this is almost ready…"

Manuela leant forward and kissed her softly on the lips, partly to shush her, and partly because she could hardly restrain herself.

"Then, it will be waiting for us tomorrow evening. You will get to take some time for yourself, for a change, instead of having to play the doting housewife. Isn't that just splendid?"

"Manuela, I don't think this is wise…"

"Schatz," the younger woman said patiently, tugging at the ribbons of Elisabeth's apron so it fell loose around her waist. "Please, do look inside this envelope. And then change into something nice, and let me take you out for dinner."

Barely an hour later, they were both facing each other and enjoying what was probably the most delicious, and equally expensive meal of their lives. Well, one of them, at least, was enjoying it. Elisabeth, for her part, was shifting uncomfortably in her seat as she watched Manuela take eager bites without a care in the world. They had walked past this restaurant countless of times on their way to and from home, but the very idea of eating there had never even crossed their minds until tonight. Elisabeth allowed herself to subtly glance

over at the elegant round tables, each decorated with fresh flowers, and at the equally chic clientele. She looked back down at herself, feeling unusually underdressed and self-conscious in spite of having donned her Sunday best for the occasion.

"This is nonsensical," she murmured to herself.

"That you have barely eaten anything? I'll say," Manuela said, pointing towards Elisabeth's almost untouched plate. "Is the fish not good? We can order something else."

"The fish is delicious, as it ought to be for something worth a whole month of fresh produce."

Manuela straightened in her seat. She carefully patted her mouth with her napkin, looking every bit the graceful, well-bred girl Elisabeth remembered from her days at boarding school. "What is it, then?"

"Has it occurred to you that there might be a catch to this sudden increase of income?"

"A catch? There's no catch," Manuela asserted, inflexible and final. "The theatre has a new owner, a generous one, at that. Great news for us. Why would I torment myself over this?"

Elisabeth ignored the question, determined to enquire further. "What did Gerhardt have to say about it?"

"He was livid, because he is an old hand, allergic to change of any kind. He says he doesn't want to take orders from some, and I quote, 'uncultured newly rich who has no idea what to do with his money'. He's afraid it might muzzle our creativity, or some gibberish akin to it."

"I'm glad to see it doesn't worry you, however."

"Not in the least, no. These so-called ignorant benefactors have the

power to save companies like ours, make them thrive. It happens all the time, really. It may seem dubious to you is because you're not from this world," Manuela retorted hotly and then, she realised the implication of what she had just said. "I don't mean…"

"No, I understand," the older woman cut, a little too sharply. "I don't know anything about these things, after all."

Manuela reached over to take her hand in hers, and Elisabeth let her.

"I didn't mean to offend you, darling," she assured again. "I simply don't want to overthink it. We have enough to worry about as it is. Is this wrong of me?"

Elisabeth finally met Manuela's eyes, and as always, she was won over by the sincerity she found there. "No. I suppose it's not," she conceded, giving her hand one final squeeze before she chastely withdrew hers.

"This place reminds me of a restaurant my father used to take us on Sundays," Manuela then said, after a moment and out of the blue. Elisabeth smiled fondly at the young woman's ability to make heavy conversations take a more pleasant turn quite effortlessly.

"You do seem to be perfectly in your element."

"Ah! I always knew you had a soft spot for women who could properly use a fish knife," the actress laughed and was pleased when Elisabeth joined in.

"Not all of them," Elisabeth specified, leaning forward as her voice dropped an octave lower. "Mostly the mysterious kind I also have to berate daily for swearing like a trooper or eating with their mouth open. But Mademoiselle Aubert's classes seem to have paid off, after all."

"Oh please! Everything I know about good manners I owe to my mother, certainly not Mademoiselle Aubert. She was a very lenient

woman, but she was adamant on teaching us proper etiquette from a very young age."

A cloud of sadness fell upon her brow and they both turned silent for a moment, turning their attention back to their plates.

"She did a fine job," Elisabeth breathed out suddenly, searching for Manuela's eyes. "Your mother. She would be proud."

"I wonder, sometimes…" she admitted, her broken smile making Elisabeth's heart throb painfully. "I have idolised my parents for so long, since I lost them young and I've never seen them be anything but kind to me. But I don't know how they would see me now."

"Exactly the same as they did, and I am sure they adored you."

"I truly believe they did," Manuela said, still smiling. "It didn't last nearly long enough, but we have been very happy."

This time, it was Elisabeth's turn to reach out and place her hand over Manuela's, no longer caring about being appropriate.

"I'm not sad," Manuela specified with a wet chuckle that suggested the exact opposite.

"But of course, not!" the older woman teased gently, and allowed her thumb to brush over Manuela's knuckles. Then, almost timidly, she ventured, "Do you ever think of… going back home? Someday?"

"Home?"

"To Potsdam…"

Manuela blinked, seeming utterly confused. "Why on Earth would I want to go back?"

"I- I… Because this is our homeland."

"It doesn't mean anything anymore though, does it? We don't have anyone left there."

"But Bertram is -"

"Bertram is dead," Manuela bit back, and the horror behind her words left Elisabeth gaping in shock.

"You don't know that!"

The actress shook her head, and gritted her teeth in an excruciating attempt to keep the tears away.

"I've made my peace with it."

"Manuela, how can you say something like that?" Elisabeth exclaimed, squeezing the captive hand so hard that her nails almost pierced through the skin.

Manuela did not seem to notice nor care. With her free hand, she reached for a cigarette and brought it to her lips. She lit it with trembling fingers and took a long drag, closing her eyes and inhaling shakily, as she always did whenever she needed to collect herself and think before speaking her mind. Elisabeth, ever conflicted when it came to Manuela –and quite frankly, most things in life- despised these antics as much as she was in love with them.

Finally, Manuela reclined back in her seat. "I have cried enough tears for him," she started, the smoke coming out of her mouth in hypnotising waves of white. "I have cried for all of them. For Alfred. For my parents. If Berti is not dead by now, which is unlikely, he might as well be lying in a hospital bed, forever crippled, or rotting in a cell God knows where. Either way I will never get to see my brother again.

Elisabeth wanted to protest. Surely these catastrophic outcomes Manuela was enumerating were not the only possibilities. But the young woman's burning gaze locked on hers, almost defiant, and

again, she was stunned into silence.

"This is what *our homeland* does to people, Elisabeth. Turning boys into cannon fodder and girls into their willing slaves, for as long as they manage to stay alive, that is."

"This is not all there is to it…" Elisabeth argued feebly.

"Is it not? Where do you think I would be if we'd stayed there? And where would *you* be? I can't possibly miss a place that destroyed everyone I love and could have as well destroyed us. Aren't we happy here?"

"I –yes…"

"We are free. And we're so lucky of *never* having to go back!"

Again Elisabeth was unable to articulate her thoughts, and she looked away in panic. She understood Manuela's feelings all too well and she was not surprised to finally hear her voice it. But she could not ignore the stifling anguish that bubbled within her at the implication. They would never go back. They would never stroll along the alleys of the Parkanlage Sanssouci together, nor get to lay in the grass, bathed in the late summer sun by the Jungfernsee. These times were over, for eternity. At this moment, Elisabeth came to the shocking realization that what she had always thoughtlessly considered a mere parenthesis in her life had become her actual life along the way, and she had absolutely had no say in it any longer. She felt like a mouse in a trap. Foolish, because she had entered of her own volition. Hopeless, because she had no way out. Suddenly, she was no longer able to breathe. She looked at Manuela for help, and noticed that she was talking to her, her face growing more alarmed by the second. But she could not hear a single word, nothing apart from deafening silence. She could not reply to whatever Manuela was saying. Before long, she felt herself slip away, and as she yielded, everything turned black.

11. Chapter 11

Manuela plopped gracelessly onto the edge of the wooden stage, letting her feet dangle in the air like a child. An exhausted, deeply sullen child. Tonight's performance had been bad, leaving her dissatisfied to the point it she had disappeared into her changing room the second the curtain had fallen without talking to anyone. She was feeling only slightly better now, face free from makeup, and contemplating the empty auditorium seats in front of her. They did not look half as terrifying in plain light as they did when the room was plunged into darkness and the very seats were filled with nameless silhouettes. She never really gave it too much thought, before. After all, she had started as a complete amateur. It had been normal for her to stumble over words, to make mistakes; none of this had ever stopped her from feeling confident with her ability to act. But she was older now, more experienced. She had no right to be only passable, she needed to irreproachable every evening, without fail. And she was far from it. At times, she wondered why she subjected herself to this nonsense. Tonight particularly, she could not for the life of her figure out why she had once believed she was fit for such a horribly taxing career.

Lady Windermere's Fan had premiered at the Temple theatre only a few days ago, and it had already been acclaimed by the audience and critics, from what she had heard. Manuela should have been content but, true to herself, she was feeling the exact opposite. Maybe she was losing her touch, or maybe she was not right for the character. Comedy was not her strong suit, she had repeated over and over again. Surely people could sense it? But as expected everyone, even Mr. Jensen, had gone out of their way to assure her of the contrary. Maybe they simply wanted to be gracious. Maybe they had no misgiving wallowing in mediocrity. Regardless, Manuela was finding it increasingly difficult to accept the praise, the pats on the back, the constant attention when she felt like such a fraud, and so inadequate these days that she regularly woke up with the urge to quit acting altogether. Elisabeth refused to hear any of it, brushing it off as one of Manuela's countless self-faith crises and arguing that if she was not fit to act, no one else in the company and perhaps in Broadway was.

Of course Elisabeth would disregard Manuela's insecurities when she was unable to even acknowledge her own. After what had happened at the restaurant, the actress had been resolute to cut to the chase and finally have this serious, overdue talk with Elisabeth. Naturally, she had been met with some vague excuse that had left a bitter taste in her mouth. Merely a bit of nostalgia, Elisabeth had assured. She was very happy here, of course, she was, she had promised. Feeling anger bubble deep within her, Manuela had nodded tersely before grabbing her coat and almost running to Ida's apartment, positively irate and demanding answers.

"Tell me what is going on with your sister. Tell me now, Ida, or I can assure you…" she had started, her fists clenching and unclenching angrily.

"Are you out of your mind?" the singer had asked, eyes rounding in outrage and hair pointing towards unusual directions at such an early time in the evening. At this very moment, and upon noticing her sister-in-law quickly tying the knot of her bathrobe, Manuela had realised she might have interrupted something, and she had had the delicacy of looking slightly apologetic for about a second before re-entering the fray with renewed fervour.

"What is it, then? You must know something…"

Ida had then taken a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair in an empty attempt to smooth it down.

"Listen to me very carefully. You and my sister are both…" she had started, almost snorting at Manuela's absolute trepidation. "So painfully pig-headed and stubborn! You deserve each other! And I will not be stuck in the middle of your pointless arguments ever again which, in passing, would have no reason to be if only you two decided to stop behaving like idiots for one second!"

She had concluded her inspired delivery by slamming the door in a flabbergasted Manuela's face, giving her no chance to argue.

Ida had been right, Manuela thought. Communication was key to most delicate situations, she knew this. What she also knew was that it was a skill she and Elisabeth were not very good at, as uncanny as it was for an actress and a teacher. There was a time where they did talk about anything, a time when Manuela knew she could turn to Elisabeth anytime, and would unmistakably be met with patient and wise advice, or even simply a good-natured smile that said so much. Where had these times gone? It was terrible and cruel, she thought, to miss someone so much, someone who was right *there*. Even Ida was shutting the door at her face now, literally and figuratively. Manuela felt trapped and lonely, and this was not something she took well to. She felt like a wreck –a sham of an actress that even the woman she adored did not trust enough to confide in. Again, the thought of her beloved Elisabeth, miles away from her, filled her with a fresh wave of helplessness and, soon enough, exasperation.

"Damn it!" Manuela cursed to no one in particular, letting her two clenched fists hit the wooden boards with a loud bang.

"There you are," a soft voice resounded in the otherwise silent theatre, and Manuela had to squint to identify its owner.

She almost sighed upon realising that the person who was now steadily walking towards her was Abigail, her most dedicated admirer. "Uh –I was just about to leave…" she ventured.

"Oh?" The girl's face fell at the words and she came to a halt in front of the stage, and necessarily, in front of Manuela. "Right. I simply wanted to give you this, since I couldn't get to you last time."

With that, she procured a bottle of whisky from her handbag and gave it to Manuela with a hopeful smile.

"Whisky," she commented, secretly impressed. "And the good stuff, too!"

"It's nothing."

Nothing? Manuela looked between the bottle and the girl's face with a certain amount of curiosity. This was probably worth more than a month of the girl's salary. If she even worked at all.

"You don't have to bring me presents all the time, you know. Especially not that expensive."

"Oh –I didn't buy it. I stole it from my father's cabinet," she admitted with a giggle at Manuela's scandalised look. "But don't worry, he won't notice a thing. He hates whisky, but he pretends not to."

Well, that explained it. She was a rich daddy's girl… Regardless, it was nice.

"In that case… thank you, Abigail."

The girl blushed deliciously upon hearing Manuela say her name, and she looked away.

"Don't thank me. You were quite frankly incredible tonight, as you always are. It was the least I could do."

"Right…" Manuela replied, her tone sharp and unconvinced. "Incredible."

"It's true," Abigail insisted, taking a step closer. "Surely you've read the critics? They are heaping praise on you!"

"Ah, what else is new? One day they worship you and the next, they are ready to nail you down to the ground."

"So you never read them?" the girl asked, agape.

Manuela hesitated for a moment, unsure if she wanted to open up about her insecurities to someone barely knew. "Let's say that they make me jittery, and not in a good way. Good or bad, I tend to get so

nervous that the words have lost all meaning by the time I reach the end of the first column."

This made the girl chuckle, but she quickly grew serious again. "Well, I think you are amazing."

"And I think you are slightly partial. But thank you, anyway."

"Is this the reason you are sad?" the girl looked down timidly as if asking something forbidden.

"I –I'm not… I really need to go," Manuela muttered, pushing herself off the stage hastily.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry… I didn't mean to pry. But when I came in and saw you sitting here on your own, you looked like you could use a friend."

The actress studied the young woman standing in front of her. She had never noticed before, nor given it any sort of thought, but her pointed chin and the hint of mischief in her eyes made her look a lot like Yvette. Manuela sighed and looked down at the bottle she was still holding.

"Fancy a drink?" she offered, and then winced. "Wait. How old are you?"

Abigail blinked, obviously not expecting the sudden change in topic. "23."

"Oh that's… alright then," Manuela quickly muttered, wary not to divulge that she herself was a year younger. "Stay there. I'll get glasses for us."

“But he did realise before walking onstage, right?”

“That’s the thing! He went out there without a care in the world and noticed only at the end of act 2. Might have felt a breeze down there at some point or something,” Manuela guffawed, downing the rest of her drink in one go.

She had come to the conclusion, halfway through the bottle, that leaving such fine whisky to a man incapable of appreciating it would have been a crime. This girl had been nice to talk to, in the end. *Woman*, she mentally corrected herself.

“I really should head home,” she said, glancing at her watch.

“I had no idea it was so late,” the blonde smiled, obviously disappointed but willing not to show it. “Thank you for tonight… I had no idea you could be so funny. I mean, I knew it, but I am happy that I got the chance to witness it.”

“I’m guessing the whisky might have helped, just a tad.”

“Probably, yes.”

“I truly must dash, my wife will be waiting for me,” Manuela half-mumbled as she attempted to put her arm through the sleeve of her coat with visible difficulty. “Are you okay to get back on your own?”

There was a sound that sounded like a gasp, followed by a moment of silence before the girl jumped to her feet to help Manuela with the garment. “Yes, yes. Go on,” she assured.

“Good night then.”

“Manuela, wait!” the girl yelled.

The actress whirled around gracelessly upon hearing her name, eyelids half closed already.

“Hm?”

“I… I like you a lot,” the blonde in front of her blurted out, and even through her blurry vision, Manuela could tell that her cheeks were

aflame. This made her laugh, and she waved her hand in a dismissive move.

“Ohh Yvette, I like you too.”

From what Manuela could see, which again, was not much at that point, she noticed the thin line of the girl’s mouth turn slightly downward and this was when she realised her mistake.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she quickly apologised. “You look like someone who was very dear to me and –to be frank, I think I might be drunk. Will you forgive me?”

The blonde nodded vigorously, which vaguely relieved Manuela until she noticed that the girl seemed to be drawing closer to her. And closer. She opened her mouth to enquire about the sudden and quite unwelcome promiscuity but, before she had a chance, a kiss was being pressed against it.

Notes for the Chapter:

I know. You hate me.

12. Chapter 12

When Manuela entered the flat, she half expected to find it bathed in blinding light, her furious wife waiting for her in the living room with a look of quiet disdain on her face. This had happened so many times before that she found herself almost wishing for the familiarity of it as fumbled to open the front door. This, at least, she knew how to handle. Therefore she was surprised, and quite awkwardly disappointed to find the place dark and silent. She rubbed her forehead and sighed, discarding her shoes with the other hand.

Clumsily, she padded her way through the hallway and living room, bumping into the furniture multiple times and swearing at herself through gritted teeth for being such a darn, *verdammter Idiot*! With great effort, she reached the bedroom and pushed the door open as soundlessly as possible and held out her breath. Again, the room was dark but she could clearly notice the form of her sleeping wife. Manuela made her way to the bed, desperate to be closer to her, and she sat on the edge, careful not to disturb her slumber. She could barely make out her traits through the obscurity, but she already knew them by heart, and at her side, her fingers twitched, aching to trace the outlines of the face she adored. To Manuela, there was nothing more soothing than watching Elisabeth's sleeping face. When she was awake, the other woman often shied away from her scrutiny and hid her discomfort by scolding at Manuela, asking if she had nothing better to do, really. No. She never had anything better to do. Unable to hold back any longer, she allowed her fingertips to brush against the delicate skin of her jaw just slightly, with utmost reverence.

Elisabeth sighed and seemed to lean into the touch, and Manuela's heart skipped a beat. Her mouth opened in awe and her thumb travelled across the woman's cheek, almost of its own accord until it skimmed over her lower lip. It was Manuela's turn to sigh at the incredible softness she felt there. Unconsciously, she reached up to touch her own mouth, almost as if to place an indirect kiss against Elisabeth's open lips. As she did, the memory of foreign lips pressed against hers came back to her and her eyes closed in shame. This had really happened, then. She truly had been kissed by someone else as

her trusting wife was peacefully asleep in their bed. As guilt threatened to swallow her whole once more, she felt Elisabeth move under her open palm and stir.

"Manuela…" she slurred.

The younger woman held her breath, ready to apologise, but Elisabeth simply rolled on her side and fell into an even deeper slumber. Talking in her sleep was some sort of habit the older woman did not know, or rather refused to acknowledge that she had. Usually, Manuela never missed a chance to tease her about it. But tonight, her wife's quirk did not seem amusing at all, instead causing a loud sob to escape from her mouth.

"It's okay, darling," a still sleepy Elisabeth told her, instinctively reaching out to her side of the bed, and Manuela collapsed in tears over her sleeping body.

"Hm-Manuela…" she said again, only more alert this time.

"Don't mind me," the younger woman said between sobs. "Go back to sleep."

Quite expectedly, this had the opposite effect.

"What is going on?"

"Nothing… Really."

Even in the darkness of the room, Manuela could see Elisabeth narrowing her eyes threateningly, and she should not have been surprised to see her push back the covers and fumble to light up the bedside lamp.

"*What* is going on?" she asked again, now hovering over Manuela quite threateningly.

"I-I don't know," Manuela mumbled.

"You don't know?"

Almost on instinct, Manuela rose up, only to fall on her knees in front of the standing woman, in complete surrender.

"I'm sorry," she wailed, and threw herself against Elisabeth's body.

"Manuela, you're scaring me! What is it?"

The actress ignored the question and repeated her apologies over and over again, pressing open mouth kisses against the covered skin of her wife's stomach. Elisabeth, still drowsy, involuntarily closed her eyes at the sensation of Manuela's warm breath through the flimsy fabric of her nightgown, and she let her fingers weave through her hair soothingly. She knew that there would be no discussion until Manuela had calmed down.

Almost as if reading her mind, Manuela lifted her head slightly and said, "I just- I just need to cry for a little while."

Elisabeth could not help but smile at the adorable confession, and she brushed a stray tear away with her thumb. "Then cry."

The younger woman simply nodded and pushed her forehead back into her lower belly, linking her arms around her waist in a vice-like grip. They remained like this for a long while, Manuela sobbing uncontrollably and holding onto her wife for dear life while Elisabeth gently rocked them back and forth, cradling Manuela's head in her hands. Finally, as the sobs subsided and she no longer felt the younger woman shake so much against her, Elisabeth pushed her slightly by the shoulders, and looked at her swollen, tear-stained face. To her, the sight of her Manuela so distraught was close to unbearable, but she willed herself to remain calm.

"Now…" she said, her tone firm but warm. "Get out of these clothes and get into bed. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Manuela erupted, tightening her hold around

her waist even more.

"To get you a glass of water."

The younger woman nodded and, quite reluctantly, released her hold.

When Elisabeth came back a few moments later, she found Manuela in bed, just as she'd asked her, but quite surprisingly, entirely naked.

"I couldn't find my nightgown," she quickly explained, sounding as apologetic as she looked.

"I washed it this morning," Elisabeth chuckled, pushing a glass of water under her nose. "Do you want me to fetch you a fresh one? Not that I mind…"

"No. Stay here."

"Yes, darling. I am here," she said, sitting down on the bed next to her wife and watching as she gulped down the water obediently. "So… would you like to tell me what had you so overwhelmed just now?"

She noticed how Manuela averted her eyes as she placed the glass back down on the bedside table and added, "You know you can trust me with anything. Don't you?"

"You will hate me…"

"Why are you saying these things?" she urged, taking the other woman's face between her hands and forcing their eyes to meet. "I could never hate you."

"Never? Are you really so sure?"

And then, some sort of realisation seemed to down on Elisabeth, and she recoiled.

"Manuela? Have you…" she murmured, almost unwilling to form the words. "Have you killed someone?"

The question came as a bit of a shock to them both, and for a split second, the younger woman almost seemed confused. Had she? She frowned.

"No…"

"Then what? What is it?"

"Someone kissed me," Manuela finally blurted out.

Elisabeth's face remained blank, almost as if she had not heard what Manuela had just said.

"Elisabeth? I said-"

"Yes, I heard what you said perfectly well," the other woman snapped, letting go of her face.

"I didn't realise… I didn't want it, I swear."

"Who?"

"What?" Manuela blinked.

"Who kissed you?"

"I- this was…"

"Who?" Elisabeth reiterated, this time quite forcefully.

"Abigail!" Manuela almost yelled, closing her eyes at the admission. "I swear I didn't expect any of it. It had been a shitty representation, and she came in out of nowhere with a bottle of very good whisky and we started talking… And it simply felt good to talk to someone, for a change. I'm so, so sorry. I'm an idiot and I don't deserve you and I…" Manuela stammered, and burst into tears once again.

Elisabeth did not even have the strength to remain stoic and draped her arms around her crying wife's shoulders.

"Stop it. Don't ever say things like this, do you hear me?" she ordered and Manuela could only acquiesce mutely. She visibly relaxed, and hugged the younger woman tighter against her. "I should be the one asking for your forgiveness, all things considered."

"You? But why?"

"Because," Elisabeth started, reclining slightly to look into Manuela's eyes. "For some reason, it felt safer for you to stay at the theatre with a girl you barely knew instead of coming back home to me when all you wanted was to talk. And I understand that I am to blame, for having pushed you away far too many times."

"No, darling. No," Manuela let out urgently. "None of this is your fault!"

"But it is, at least partly." With that, Elisabeth stood up, and went to turn off the light, before quickly getting under the covers next to Manuela, who immediately snuggled against her side.

"So you're not mad?"

"At you? Never."

After a moment, Elisabeth's voice resounded again in the quiet room, deliberately nonchalant. "You did not… kiss her back, did you?"

"What? Of course not!" Manuela assured, scandalized. "I pushed her away with all my might, poor girl… I mean- this was well-deserved, of course."

"Really now?"

"Elisabeth, come on. You know that you are the only one I have ever kissed in my entire life. Well, apart from Yvette. And…"

"And Treskow, but once and as a dare. Yes, I know," Elisabeth interrupted with a sigh but still drew the other woman closer to her.

"Exactly. Nothing to be jealous of."

"I am *never* jealous."

"Right. And neither am I."

"Of course not," Elisabeth chuckled and was quickly joined by the younger woman.

"But I'd like for us to promise each other something, however," Manuela ventured, suddenly sounding very serious. "Let's talk more now, yes? And let's stop keeping things for ourselves until we explode. Alright?"

"Y-yes…" Elisabeth let out with incredible difficulty.

"Okay then," Manuela murmured, and settled more comfortably against her wife. After a short while, she fell into a deep, relaxed slumber. Elisabeth did not.